Triumvirate

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Fandom: pokémon

Summary: In an untamed world filled with monsters and beasts, four young people discover that true horror lies not between gnashing jaws, but within the hearts of men and women just like them. [Realistic Pokemon AU] [Mangaverse w/ some anime and game influences]

Status: Completed

Fic type: Games/Pokémon

Pairings/Main char.: Ash K./Satoshi, Gary O./Shigeru, Yellow, Green/Blue (female)

Published: 2015-05-23

Last updated: 2016-01-05

Words count: 433,165

Chapters count: 30

Converted using www.FF2EBOOK.com
Date: 2018-04-26

1. Pallet Town

Triumvirate, chapter 1: Pallet Town
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon
Rating: M for violence and adult themes

Notes (but actually please read this, it could help): This is very loosely based on the Pokémon Adventures manga (RBGY chapters), which is helpful but not necessary to be familiar with to enjoy this fic. Read it if you can, though, it's amazing and well worth your time. One heads-up to avoid confusion: I'm using the English established anime/game names for the characters (Red is Ash, Blue is Gary, Green is Ivy, Yellow is Lily, Silver is Marco, Gold is Ethan, and Crystal is Lyra) even though I just said this is mangaverse. Yes, I realize some people will be put off by that choice, but that's what's happening here. Trivial nomenclature issues aside, I like heroic, dark, adventure stories with plenty of silver linings, laughs, and romance along the way. If you like that, too, you've definitely come to the right place.

Somewhere far away from the rest of the world, a young man in worn jeans, a red jacket, and a matching ball cap that did little to calm his wild, black hair was hunched over squinting at tracks in the mud that had trampled a trip wire meant to alert the nearby townspeople of any threats that wandered too close. Waves offered a droning din in the background from the wide bay to the south, and the sounds of buzzing and chirping carried along the breeze from the the untamed wilds to the north. But Ash Ketchum heard none of this as he stared at the tracks in the mud and tried to remember what beast they belonged to and whether he should be worried it was this close to his home.

Five toes, but that's a pretty big index claw. Which means...

Rustling in the tall grass nearby startled Ash, and he rose with one hand on a Pokéball at his belt. But he was too slow, and the shadow that had been stalking him lashed out. He went down with a grunt of pain and kicked as hard as he could. His Pokéball slipped out of his hand and rolled away, out of reach.

The wild Raticate had gotten him in the calf and tore open his flesh through his jeans. Blood darkened the material and dripped onto the tall grass. Raticate was no bigger than a common house cat, but its vicious nature warded off many would-be predators—or trackers. Ash hissed in pain and kicked out again as the Raticate gnashed its bloodied jaws at him again. Behind the beast, newborn Rattata looked

on from between the grass as their mother fended off the intruder.

"Shit—!"

The feral rodent was going to rip him apart if he didn't do something fast. Ash reached back for Wartortle's Pokéball that had slipped from his grip before, but it was just out of reach. The Raticate lunged and Ash prepared himself to part with a chunk of his thigh, but out of nowhere a black blur slammed into Raticate and tackled it to the ground.

A canine Pokémon wrestled Raticate into submission and bit down hard around its windpipe. The wound smoked and smoldered with fire where the teeth bit in, and soon the smell of roasting flesh permeated the air. The canine began to tear into the cooking flesh and yank hunks of it free to consume, blood and bone and all. Ash's red eyes watered with tears of irritation and pain, and he scrambled backward some more.

"Hey, you okay?"

A hand gripped his arm and hauled him to his feet, where he staggered on his wounded leg.

"Ah!" he cried out. "Damnit, that stings."

The newcomer slung his arm over her shoulder, and Ash spared her a glance. He didn't recognize her, something he realized right away. He would've remembered a pretty face like that considering he knew everyone in Pallet Town. She looked ready to join a street gang dressed in denim and black and combat boots, but her long, brown hair and bright, blue eyes looked more like the peeved big sister type than the rebel without a cause.

"Houndour, leave that filth," she said.

The Houndour, a Pokémon Ash didn't recognize, had managed to rip one of Raticate's arms clean out of its socket and was chewing on it like a piece of jerky. Its snout was dyed red with the rodent's blood. Raticate's fur and flesh were singed and smoking where Houndour's fiery bite had seared them. Ash swallowed.

"Talk about home cooking," he said weakly.

The girl frowned up at him. "Do you live around here? You're bleeding pretty bad, and I'm not gonna carry you if you pass out."

"Uh, yeah, just south of here in Pallet Town. 'S not far—"

She was already hauling him in that direction before he could finish explaining the route. Ash stumbled a bit as he tried to find a rhythm with her and hissed in pain. Sensing his distress, she slowed down a little until they found a pace that worked for both of them.

"Thanks," Ash said. "This is kind of embarrassing."

"Raticate are mean little shits, especially the moms. Could've happened to anyone."

"Now you're just tryna make me feel better."

"Better to keep you talking instead of concentrating on how much blood you're losing."

He looked down at his leg and the uneven trail of blood he was leaving behind. The young woman's Houndour was lagging behind and sniffing the bloody ground. It had a bloody hunk of meat in its mouth that it was slowly gnawing. Ash regretted looking back just then and tried to focus on the route ahead.

"Which one's your house?" she asked.

"Huh? Oh, um..." Ash's eyes began to droop.

"Hey, don't fall asleep on me. Hey!"

"Uh..."

Ash's vision began to double and the world spun. Somewhere nearby, he thought he heard familiar voices calling out to him. Hands carried him up toward bright, stale lights. It all passed by in a blur.

"...lost a lot of blood."

"What happened?"

"Ash, you dumbass..."

Ash was pretty sure he blacked out at some point because the next thing he knew, he was lying prostrate on a bed that wasn't his in an all-too familiar laboratory surrounded by beeping, blinking machines whose names he couldn't pronounce. Faces hovered over him, watchful.

"Welcome back!"

Ash groaned. "Professor Oak?"

"Ah, excellent, I see your cognitive functions are returning."

Professor Samuel Oak was a pleasant sort of man with crows feet around his eyes that crinkled when he smiled. His once thick, brown hair had long since dulled to grey, as had his youthful good looks. Sharp cheekbones and a square-cut jaw had rounded out with old age and a life spent overworked under more artificial light than natural. But there was something about his aura that was easy on the eyes, like he could get along with anyone. He pulled away to fiddle with the bandages wrapped tightly around Ash's leg. Ash tried to sit up, but his head ached with a sharp pain.

"Ugh, what happened?"

"You passed out, obviously," said another voice.

"Hah, Gary, shoulda known you'd see me at my worst. Just like old times, huh?"

"There's nothing old about it. I told you to wait for me, and you didn't listen. Big surprise."

Gary Oak had been Ash's oldest friend and sometimes rival growing up in Pallet Town. He wore jeans and hiking boots with a black T-shirt under a violet button-down open in the front. He crossed his arms, and Ash had the sudden thought that he looked way too much like his grandfather would have looked in his youth, except surly and mean. Where Professor Oak smiled in that kind, understanding way he had, Gary only ever scowled or smirked like he had a superiority complex —not that it was without merit. For as long as Ash could remember, Gary had always been ahead of him, be it in Pokémon training, academics, common sense... He had that trademark smirk on now, and Ash just wanted to get out of bed and slap it off him.

"Yeah, yeah. Turns out I didn't need you." He looked around. "Hey, where'd she go?"

"You mean Ivy? She's the one who hauled your sorry ass back here."

"Talking about me?"

Ivy returned just then with a glass of water in hand. Ash perked up.

"I never got a chance to thank you."

"Actually you did. Wouldn't shut up about it. You don't remember?"

Ash smiled sheepishly. "Guess that Raticate really did a number on me, huh?"

Professor Oak checked Ash's vitals on a nearby monitor. "Well, Ash, you'll survive. You just need to rest a bit and eat something to replenish the blood you lost. I gave you a Super Potion to speed up the healing. You should be walking around later tonight."

"Really? That's awesome! Thanks, Professor!"

"No problem. Just be sure sure to wait for Gary next time, all right? Route One may not be the bowels of Mt. Silver, but even a tiny Raticate can and will lash out if provoked. I'd feel much better if you two stick together until you get stronger."

"Yeah, sorry about that..."

"I'll go talk with your mother. I'm sure she'll want to know you're okay."

Professor Oak took his leave from the lab's basement and left Ash alone with Gary and Ivy.

"So," Gary said, arms still crossed. "Ivy. Where'd you say you were from?"

"I didn't say."

Ash looked between the two of them. They stood on opposite sides of Ash's bed as they stared each other down. He got a slight chill and wondered if he was still a little woozy from the blood loss.

"By the way, I've never seen a Pokémon like yours before," Ash chimed in. "What was it? Hound something?"

Gary caught Ash's eye briefly. "Houndour?"

"That was it! Man, Gary, you shoulda seen it tear into that Raticate with Fire Fang."

"So you must be from Johto," Gary said, ignoring Ash's comment. "You're a long way from home."

Ivy narrowed her eyes. "Is that a problem?"

"I just don't get why you wouldn't say so when I asked you before."

Ash had a feeling this conversation was going south very fast, so he smiled and waved a hand to get their attention. "Hey, don't act like I'm not even here. I'm the idiot who got hurt, so I think that makes me the doofus of honor around here."

Ivy laughed a little, and Gary proceeded to cross his arms more tightly.

"Anyway, glad you're doing better, Ash. I should be going," Ivy said.

"What? No way! You just got here, and I sorta owe you my life, you know?"

"You most certainly do!"

All eyes turned to the door to the lab basement where Delia Ketchum, Ash's mother, burst into the room in a tizzy.

"Mom?"

"My goodness, what *happened*? The Professor said something about a Raticate, and how a young woman dragged you all the way back here —Oh!" She noticed Ivy standing there and took her hands in her own. "This must be her. I can't thank you enough for saving my son's life."

"Uh, it was nothing, really, I just happened to be in the area—"

"Nonsense! I have to repay you somehow... Oh, I know! Why don't you join us for dinner tonight?"

"Really, that's not necessary—"

"I won't take no for an answer, young lady. You're not from around here, are you? In that case, I insist you stay the night with us. It's getting late and this is no place for a young woman to be traveling at night all alone."

Mrs. Ketchum's smile was just a bright and blinding as her son's, and Ivy was leaning back a little with nowhere to retreat to so long as Mrs. Ketchum didn't let go of her hands.

"Well, I guess I could stay for one ni—"

"Perfect!" Mrs. Ketchum released her and approached Ash's bedside. She ruffled his wild, black hair. "And as for you, feel better, okay? I'll make your favorite tonight."

Ash began to salivate and see double again, but not from blood loss. "Pot roast? Really, you'd do that for me, Mom?"

"Of course! Oh, and Gary, Daisy, and the Professor are invited, too! Let's make a party of it."

Gary put up his hands. "That's nice of you, Mrs. Ketchum, but I—"

"Great! See you all at 8 pm sharp. Don't be late, now!"

She blew out of there without waiting for any further protests and once more left Ash alone with Gary and Ivy.

"So, that was my mom," Ash said. "You get used to her."

"Right," Ivy said.

Gary said nothing as he continued to study Ivy. Ash wondered what he was thinking and decided it was probably something that would only make his head hurt more.

"I better go tell my sister we've got dinner plans all of a sudden. I'll see you later, Ash," he said.

He left without so much as a glance at Ivy. Ash laughed nervously.

"You get used to him, too."

Ivy untied the green cargo jacket from around her waist and pulled it on. "I feel like that's a bit optimistic."

"Haha, yeah, I see your point." He paused to think. "So, wanna add to my embarrassment and help me hobble back to my place? You know, since I guess we'll be rooming tonight."

Being the sweet person she was, Daisy insisted on bringing a dessert to the Ketchums' dinner party over Gary's protests.

"You know I didn't even want to go, right?" he complained.

"All the more reason to show our appreciation. Besides, what's wrong with dinner? Mrs. Ketchum's pot roast is legendary."

"Whatever."

Daisy smiled knowingly. "I don't know when you're going to just admit that you like hanging out with Ash and you're pissed he ran off without you today because you felt left out."

"Okay, it's not like that at all. I'm nineteen-years-old, not five."

"Depends on the day."

He rolled his eyes and scratched his head. Daisy noticed what he was doing and frowned.

"Cut that out. You look like you just rolled out of bed. C'mere."

She began fussing with his hair over Gary's protests, but in the end she got what she wanted, as usual. He watched her as she worked. Her big, green eyes matched his in color, but where she was bright and welcoming, Gary was cold and calculating. Standing this close, he wondered how they could even be related having turned out so different.

"There. Now you don't look like you survived a nuclear holocaust."

"It's a look. It's in these days."

"Oh, right, if you think girls like the Doesn't-Own-A-Hairbrush look. No wonder Ash has way more luck with girls than you ever did."

Gary blushed and jutted out his lower lip. "What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

Daisy smirked, and suddenly Gary remembered why they were related, after all. "Just that you could learn a thing or two from your best friend."

"He's not my best friend."

She laughed. "You're right. He's your *only* friend. Now c'mon. Grab the pie and let's go, or we'll be late! Grandpa, you ready?"

"I'm coming down!" Professor Oak called from the second floor.

Gary grumbled incoherently under his breath and snatched the pie from the counter. He glowered at it, like this was all its fault.

"Better turn that smile upside-down unless you want Mrs. Ketchum to

start asking questions~" Daisy sang.

Professor Oak came downstairs and the three of them walked down the street to the Ketchum residence. There was some scuffling inside before the door opened. Gary looked down and came face to face with Mrs. Ketchum's Mr. Mime.

"Oh, hello there," Professor Oak said.

The Mr. Mime looked them over a moment before hobbling back inside and leaving the door open. Professor Oak walked inside, followed by Daisy and Gary.

"Such an odd Pokémon," Daisy said.

"Psychics can tell whether you mean them harm," Gary said. "Be happy it didn't see us as a threat."

Inside the smell of dinner permeated the entire house. Ash was helping his mom in the kitchen while Ivy sat alone on the couch in the living room. Gary took note of her and set the pie down on the nearest available surface.

"Oh, a pie! How thoughtful," Mrs. Ketchum said.

Daisy smiled. "It's cherry."

"Wonderful! I'll just set it here in the kitchen. Ash, be a dear and get the silverware."

"Sure, Mom."

Gary slipped away while the rest of his family stayed in the kitchen to help out and converse. When he approached Ivy sitting on a couch in the living room, she didn't bother looking up.

"That's a pretty big knife for someone like you," he said, just now noticing that she was sharpening a serrated hunting knife.

She didn't look up. "Depends on your perspective."

He hovered at the edge of the coffee table in front of the couch she was sitting on and took a moment to study her. Like Ash, Gary had grown up in Pallet Town and he knew everyone and their business, more than he cared to know. Their sleepy town didn't get many visitors, even those passing through from the harbor on their way north. Perhaps it was a natural curiosity born out of the small-town

mentality he'd cultivated living here, but something told him it was more than that. There was something suspicious about this girl, and he couldn't say what. It was just a feeling. The big knife she held like she was getting ready to cut into a juicy steak didn't help matters.

"From here it looks like you can't wait to use it."

Ivy stopped sharpening and looked up. "What's your problem?"

"You mean besides you bringing that weapon in here?"

Ivy chuckled. "Okay." She stood up to her full height stepped closer to him so they were only about a foot apart. "I'm sensing some trust issues coming from you."

Gary narrowed his eyes but didn't back away. He set his jaw. "Kanto and Johto aren't exactly on good terms, haven't been since the war seventeen years ago. I'm surprised you have to ask."

She frowned and looked up at him as though wounded. "Aw, judging me for the sins of the father? That's so *mean*."

If he'd mistrusted her before, the cloyingly sweet act was downright revolting. "See, that just proves my suspicion. You're hiding something. You didn't just show up here at random."

Like someone had flipped a switch, she dropped the wounded puppy act and her expression frosted over. "You really are suspicious, aren't you?" She held the sharpened knife up between them and ghosted the flat of the blade across his cheek. "I *hate* that in a man."

Gary had the urge to recoil from danger, but she pulled the knife back and sheathed it in a holster strapped to her thigh over her jeans before he got the chance.

"Dinner's ready!" Mrs. Ketchum called from the kitchen.

Ivy flashed Gary a curling smile and sauntered off toward the dining room. Gary swallowed the lump in his throat and only then noticed how fast his heart was beating. He took a calming breath and rubbed a hand over his cheek where the threat of her knife had been just moments ago.

"Gary, hurry before it gets cold!"

"Yeah, I'm coming."

The pot roast was delicious. No, *more* than delicious. Ivy dug into her second helping with gusto. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had such good cooking. Mrs. Ketchum was only too happy to oblige her appetite.

"Whoa, you can really put it away," Ash joked.

"Oh please, Ash, I see you shoveling your third helping down your throat like you're afraid it'll get up and walk off your plate," Daisy quipped.

Ivy nearly choked on a laugh. "So you're really Gary's older sister? I never would've guessed."

Daisy giggled. "You know, I get that a *lot*."

The girls shared a knowing look across the table. Gary glared at his food but said nothing.

"Well, I'm just so happy you like the food, Ivy. It's the least I can do after what you did for Ash today," Mrs. Ketchum said.

Professor Oak cleared his throat. "That reminds me. Delia, I hope you don't mind, but I had meant to do this earlier, and now that we're all here I figure this is as good a time as any." He fished around his pocket and produced two Pokéballs. "Gary, Ash, you've both been trainers for some time now, but you still have a lot to learn. I know I asked for your help with launching my latest invention, Pokédex, and in my excitement I completely overlooked what a daunting task that's going to be.

"So I thought I'd do something to help you both become better trainers. Here." He handed a Pokéball each to Gary and Ash. "These are a couple of rare Pokémon that came into my care a little while ago. It's a bit funny, actually. They remind me of the two of you so much, and since I don't have the time to spend training them, I figured you could do the job much better."

Ash looked about ready to cry. "Oh my god, a new Pokémon? For me?"

"Gramps, I already have strong Pokémon," Gary said.

Professor Oak waved him off. "Yes, yes, I know. All that training you did in Johto with Chuck really paid off, don't think I don't know that."

Ivy nearly spit out her drink and set it down with a shaky hand. No one seemed to notice, though.

"So what is it?" Ash asked.

"Well, find out for yourself."

Ash got up and released the Pokéball. A bright light flashed and a small, rodent-like Pokémon sat on the carpet, its elongated ears and tail twitching as it sniffed the air.

"A Pikachu? Cool!" Ash kneeled down to the tiny Pokémon's eye-level. "Hey there, little buddy."

The Pikachu was on high alert and its ears flattened over its back as it eyed Ash warily. The red sacks on its cheeks sparked with static electricity as it assessed whatever threat it sensed.

"Whoa, hey, it's okay, I'm not gonna hurt you." Ash reached out a hand to pat Pikachu's head.

"Wait, Ash, don't—!" Gary started.

But he was too late, and Ash was already reaching for Pikachu. "There, see? It's okay, I'm a cool human."

Ivy could only stare in shock as Ash began to pet Pikachu gently and the little rodent actually seemed to relax a bit. It stopped sparking and shuffled closer, angling its head so Ash would scratch under its ears. He laughed and reached out with his other hand to get behind both ears. Soon Pikachu was on its back and enjoying a belly rub.

"What the hell?" Ivy said more to herself than to anyone else.

With a Pokémon he just met?

Professor Oak leaned toward her and whispered, "That's what I said the first time I saw him do it. Ash has a way with Pokémon I don't think anyone will ever be able to quite understand. It's a gift, and no amount of training or study can copy it."

Across the table, Gary took a long sip of his drink and avoided eye contact with the rest of the table's occupants.

"Hey Gary, what Pokémon did Grandpa give you?" Daisy asked, nudging him.

"Huh? Oh, I dunno."

"Well, check and see, silly!"

"Later. We're in the middle of dinner."

Mrs. Ketchum got up all of a sudden and walked to the kitchen where she produced a knife from a drawer. "So, who wants pie?"

Mr. Mime followed her to the kitchen, but it stopped all of a sudden and shifted its gaze to the western wall of the house. As though something lit a fire under it, Mr. Mime suddenly put up his hands and summoned a dazzling wall of azure light that spread across the length of the western wall. But before anyone could react, the entire kitchen exploded and she was knocked back out of her chair and skidded across the floor.

What happened next blended together into a slow-motion rush of pain, ringing sounds, and asphyxiation as smoke and dust saturated the breathable air. Ivy rolled onto her side and coughed as she clutched her head and tried to blot out the ringing. Booming, like a clock's tolling was the only sound that penetrated through the dazed ringing. Then came the screaming.

"—coming back! *Move*!"

Whether they were talking to her or not, Ivy didn't know or care. She groaned and forced herself to sit up. Pain exploded in her head, but a quick self-check didn't turn up any serious surface damage. Maybe a concussion.

Well, it's not like I can sleep with all that noise.

Coughing again, she took stock of her surroundings. The dining room table was reduced to splinters, and the entire left wall of the kitchen was razed to the ground. Stone and plaster fell from the roof into its remains. Daisy was unconscious several feet away, and Ivy crawled over to her over a broken chair to check her pulse. Alive.

"Shit," Ash said as he struggled to stand. "What the hell?"

Screaming outside drew his attention. Pikachu scampered up his back and clung to his shoulders. Its fur sparked with pent up electricity and made Ash's already unruly hair stand more on end.

"Gramps!" Gary shouted.

He was already standing and stumbling over the debris to get outside through the new hole in the kitchen. Professor Oak was nowhere to be seen. Ivy followed his example and left Daisy to get outside.

"C'mon, Ash!"

She didn't wait to see if he'd follow. Outside, houses were on fire and in various states of dilapidation. People were running in the streets screaming, but it was dark out and hard to make out any threat. Ivy's arms prickled with gooseflesh, and a hand wandered to her belt where she kept her Pokémon.

All of a sudden, a thick beam of orange light shot out of nowhere and hit a nearby tree. The trunk exploded and the tree toppled over, like a bomb had gone off from inside it. Ivy's mouth ran dry at the sight.

Hyper Beam.

Thick vines slashed the ground in front of where Gary and Ivy had run outside and smashed the earth. They skidded to a halt to avoid a collision, and just in time. A hulking Venusaur ambled in front of them just as something roared from the shadows.

"Stand back!" Professor Oak said as he ran to Venusaur's side.

"Gramps! What is it?" Gary said.

He got his answer soon enough. The owner of the terrible roar stepped into the light of a nearby house fire, eyes narrowed to slits and sharp teeth slick with drool. Ivy took a step back as she counted not one, but two of them.

"Snorlax," Gary said. "Holy shit."

Ash joined them outside with Pikachu in tow. "What the hell? What're Snorlax doing here?"

"I don't think now's the time to be asking questions." Gary reached for a Pokéball and threw it.

With a flash of light, a lean and mean-looking Scyther appeared. Its wicked, sabre-like appendages gleamed in the firelight as it sniffed the air and ruffled its wings.

"You three stay out of this!" Professor Oak said as his Venusaur began advancing on the pair of Snorlax. "You're not strong enough!"

Venusaur let out a guttural roar and whipped its vines again to keep the Snorlax at bay. But this only made them angrier. One of them began charging another Hyper Beam attack.

"Look out!"

Ivy rammed into Gary without thinking, and they both went down. The Hyper Beam hit the ground with a deafening *crack* not five feet away. Scyther screeched and took to the sky.

"Pikachu, help it out!" Ash said.

The yellow rodent scampered on the ground and engulfed itself with electricity, fearless as it ran straight for one of the attacking Snorlax. It rammed the beast's belly and caught it by surprise long enough for Gary's Scyther to slash it with a Fury Cutter. Snorlax bellowed in agony and anger as its flesh tore open from shoulder to navel.

"I think you only pissed it off more!" Ivy said as she helped Gary to his feet.

Professor Oak's Venusaur was almost as massive as the Snorlax, but it was slow. The uninjured Snorlax lowered its head and charged, and Venusaur wasn't fast enough to move, instead rearing up on its hind legs. The two behemoths collided, and Venusaur lost its balance. Snorlax gnashed its jaws at the giant flower growing from Venusaur's back and tore bits of it off. Venusaur roared in pain as it bled from its wounds and struggled to right itself.

The wounded Snorlax barely seemed to notice its gaping wound and began powering up another Hyper Beam. Ivy yanked free a Pokéball from her belt and threw it.

"Blast that son of a bitch!"

In a flash of light, a small but hefty Larvitar appeared. With a snarl, it coiled in on itself and charged power. Ivy shielded her eyes just as Snorlax's Hyper Beam collided with Larvitar's own Hyper Beam in a bone-shattering explosion that rumbled the earth.

In the commotion, Professor Oak's Venusaur managed to break free from the other Snorlax and attack it with vines. They coiled around Snorlax's arms and legs and tightened until its limbs began to turn purple. The flower atop Venusaur's back began to quiver and shed its petals. They flew through the air like bladed discuses and tore into Snorlax's swollen belly. Blood spewed from the wounds as more and

more petals cut into it. The beast roared and tried to yank free, but it was raining a river of blood onto the ground, pulpy with its innards as more razor sharp petals chewed it up like bladed lashes. In minutes, it fell to its knees and keeled over, dead.

Meanwhile, the other Snorlax had fallen and suffered severe burns from its rebuffed Hyper Beam. Larvitar had been blown back a ways and smashed into a nearby wall, the remains of a house the Snorlax had destroyed in their rampage. Snorlax was beginning to stir despite its many wounds and, incredibly, looked like it was still ready to fight back.

Gary released his Golduck, sensing the same impending danger if they didn't act fast. "Aqua Jet!"

Golduck spewed a powerful column of water that hit Snorlax in its cleaved belly, and it stumbled.

"Pikachu, finish it off!" Ash said.

Pikachu crackled with electricity and sent a bolt of lightning along the length of Golduck's water attack. The electric boost sent Snorlax into convulsions, and the acrid smell of frying flesh and muscle made Ivy's eyes water. In a matter of seconds, Snorlax collapsed and didn't get up again.

The fires still flared and the destroyed houses continued to crumble. People were still shouting. The damage was done. Ash fell to one knee, his wounded leg having opened up again. Gary kneeled down next to him and lent him a shoulder.

"You okay?"

Ash managed a smile. "Totally, never better. I could do this all night."

Ivy ignored the conversation and went looking for Larvitar now that the immediate danger was quelled. It was curled up in a heap among rubble and overturned earth.

"Larvitar, hey," she said as she pulled debris off it. "Come on, little guy, you're okay."

Larvitar had curled up into a ball. Its scaly, green armor was chinked and chipped in places, and its eyes were shut tight. A wave of panic began to flutter in Ivy's stomach.

"Larvitar, wake up."

"It can't hear you."

Professor Oak was standing to the side and looking down at her. He was bleeding from a gash on the side of his head, but he appeared otherwise fine.

"What do you mean it can't hear me?" Ivy tried shaking the little Pokémon. "Larvitar?"

"It's okay. It's not dying."

"The what the hell's wrong with it?"

Professor Oak didn't seem to take notice of her tone and gently said, "It's going into a state of hibernation. Look closer."

Ivy blinked away unshed tears and peered more closely. The deep gashes in Larvitar's armor seemed to be expanding and filling with a sand-like substance, as if its skin was becoming more of a detatched shell than a hide.

"From where I'm standing, it looks like your Larvitar's getting ready to evolve. It'll take time, of course. It'll remain in a pupa state for months as it grows."

"What does that mean? It'll be sleeping like this for months? Just like that?"

"Just like that? Young lady, your Larvitar used a Hyper Beam on command. That would make it, what, at least a decade old? Perhaps a little older judging from it large size? If you've been training it for that long, I'm not surprised it's ready to evolve. They're not easy to raise, so I've heard. Moody and temperamental, not to mention extremely hostile to people."

Ivy ran a hand over Larvitar's horn, wondering what it was going through and whether it could feel her touch. "Larvitar was my first Pokémon. We've been together for as long as I can remember," she said without thinking.

"Gramps! You gotta come quick!"

Gary skidded to a halt just shy of Professor Oak. Ivy returned Larvitar to its Pokéball and rose.

"What's the problem?" Professor Oak was already walking quickly as Gary led him back toward the Snorlax corpses.

"I checked out the Snorlax. They were wearing some kind of radio transmitters. But the weird thing is they look hardwired into their heads. I've never seen anything like it before."

The nearest fallen Snorlax was soaking face-down in a puddle of its congealing blood. Bits of intestine had spilled out from the deep gashes in its belly like tentacles. Ivy covered her mouth and nose to fend off the putrid stench surrounding it. Professor Oak didn't seem as bothered as he kneeled down and stared at the device positioned near Snorlax's left ear.

"Gramps?"

"You're right. It looks like it extends into the auditory canal. I'll have to have a look at this in the lab..." He trailed off and looked over his shoulder. "Well, perhaps not."

The lab was half destroyed from a Hyper Beam gone awry. Some of his assistants were braving the structural damage to recover laptops and other valuable equipment. Sighing, Professor Oak began to fiddle with the device.

"If I can just—ah! There it goes."

Something popped, and Gary watched as Professor Oak carefully pulled the device free. It squelched, and he paused.

"Good god."

"What is it?"

He resumed pulling, and after a moment the device was completely free of Snorlax's ear. Professor Oak stood up and held out his prize. What had originally looked like some kind of transmitter extended about a foot in length and spidered into a dozen tentacle-like appendages. They were coated in blood and something gelatinous. Gary leaned in closer to get a better look, but the tentacles twitched and he jumped.

"Incredible," Professor Oak said. "Simply incredible."

"Gramps, what is it? And why's it moving?"

He shook his head. "I have absolutely no idea. If I had to take a wild guess, I would be tempted to say it's some kind of sophisticated artificial intelligence technology. See how it seems to be searching for another host?" He jiggled the device and it twitched more violently as it tried to grab Gary.

"This is crazy. It's like we're in Invasion of the Body Snatchers."

"For our sakes, let's hope you're wrong. There may be more to this attack than a pair of rampaging Snorlax in the wrong place at the wrong time. Still, I can't do much with my lab ruined. I'll have to take this somewhere else to examine and take apart." Professor Oak walked toward the remains of his lab. "Stanley! Do we happen to have any climate-controlled storage jars left?"

Gary ran a hand through his hair. "Great. Hey, since you're already here, make yourself useful and help me look for survivors. It's wishful thinking to assume everyone made it through this. Ivy?"

Ivy didn't respond, and he turned to face her fully.

"Did you hear what I just said?"

"Chimera."

"What?"

Ivy blinked and snapped out of it. "Huh? Oh, survivors. Yeah, I'll help."

"Wait." Gary grabbed her arm and forced her to face him. "What did you just say?"

A familiar voice cried out in pain and startled them both. Ivy yanked her arm free and glared up at Gary.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Ash." Gary took off at a sprint toward the remains of Ash's home.

Grateful for the interruption, Ivy tailed him and stepped carefully over the smoking rubble remains of Ash's kitchen. The water pipes had burst and were leaking. Ivy gave them a wide berth to avoid the sparks from the electrical wiring near them. Ash was hunched over and shaking as he wept.

"Ash," Gary said as he joined him. "Oh god..."

Ivy stood back. Near where Ash and Gary were crouched down, she noticed one of Mr. Mime's arms severed from its body. There was no sight of the rest of its body, but the crumbling back wall was splattered with blood and dark, sticky globules were piled on the floor like drip-made sand castles.

"C'mon, Mom, you gotta wake up," Ash said.

Mrs. Ketchum was lying on the floor. There were no obvious signs of physical trauma, but she was passed out and unmoving. Ash shook her, but she was unresponsive.

"Damnit, this can't be happening."

Gary felt for a pulse. "She's alive, barely." He ran his fingers around the sides of her head, and they came away bloody. "Looks like she hit her head. She just passed out."

"Y-you mean, she's alive? Mom, can you hear me? Mom!"

"That Mr. Mime died protecting her," Ivy said. "All of us."

Ash choked on a sob. Pikachu was scuttling around the remains of the kitchen, its elongated ears twitching as it kept its nose to the wind.

"We need to get her to the lab," Daisy said.

She stood in the still-intact living room, where she leaned on the wall and was clutching her left arm. Blood dripped down it to the floor where it splashed her white shoes.

"Daisy," Gary said, going to her. "You're hurt."

"I'll live. But we have to help Mrs. Ketchum and the rest of the people who got hurt in the attack."

The rest of the night was spent combing through the rubble of destroyed homes for injured survivors of the Snorlax attack. Once Daisy and Gary got Ash standing and away from his mother's body, he lost track of time searching for survivors. About a quarter of the population had died in the surprise attack, and more than half suffered injuries severe enough to warrant professional medical attention.

The sun had risen hours ago, and Ash was still wandering the outskirts

of Pallet Town. Pikachu trailed him at a sedate pace, exhausted but unwilling to be left behind. Ash wiped his brow of sweat and grime. The morning sun seared his vision and disoriented him for a moment, so he paused to regain his bearings. He'd made it a ways out of town by now. The grass here was taller and the trees were thicker the higher up the hill he climbed. Far to the west lay a mountain chain with Mt. Silver towering high above its neighbors and breaching the clouds. To the south lay the ocean, an endless stretch of ultramarine beyond which lay Cinnabar Island. Ash took a deep breath.

Mom...

Pikachu plopped down near his foot to rest. A salty breeze came in from the south, peaceful in spite of the carnage below.

"Guess there wouldn't be any survivors this far out."

And yet, his feet refused to move him from this spot. The wind felt cool against his sunburned brow. He removed his cap and ruffled his hair to release the dampness that had gathered there.

Pikachu jolted awake all of a sudden and scuttled around Ash. Its tail twitched erratically as it stilled to listen and sniff the air.

"Pikachu? What is it?"

The yellow rodent dashed among the tall grass and disappeared from sight.

"Hey, wait! Where're you goin'?"

Ash ran after the Pokémon into the thicker part of the woods. As he ran, he began to notice an animal path that looked recently forged. Branches were split and the grass had been trampled underfoot. It looked like a several people—or two massive Pokémon—had passed by here. A knot formed in Ash's throat, but he kept after Pikachu. He didn't have long to run. Pikachu had skidded to a halt among a small copse, but it went no further.

"Pikachu?"

Something mewled in the grass ahead, like it was in pain. Ash's hand instinctively went to the hunting knife at his belt as he crept forward.

"Who's there?"

The grass shook like something was moving around in it, and the mewling grew louder and more desperate. Pikachu growled and began to spark. Following the trodden path, it wasn't long before the source of the mewling became apparent. Ash froze in his tracks, barely breathing.

A small Munchlax was curled up at the base of a tree. At the sight of Ash and Pikachu, it cried louder. Its wide eyes were shifty as it tried to back up further into the tree.

"You..."

Ash drew the hunting knife at his thigh and brandished it at Munchlax. It had to be the offspring of the two Snorlax that had attacked. Its cries were so loud that Ash winced. But nothing would answer it now that its parents were dead. Tears welled in Ash's eyes as he stared down at this shaking ball of fur, almost cute, and he wondered if it saw in him what he'd seen in the eyes of those demented Snorlax as they razed his home and slaughtered the people he'd grown up with.

Ash's hand shook around the hilt of his knife, an old, worn thing that had once belonged to his late father. Its blade reflected in Munchlax's wide, dark eyes.

"Because of you, Mom's—"

He choked on a sob and stepped forward, knife first. Munchlax quieted down, but it didn't try to escape. Paralyzed with fear, it awaited its fate.

But he couldn't do it.

Ash dropped the knife and heaved a shaky breath. "You're just as scared as I was, aren't you?"

Munchlax was trembling, unable even to cry out now that Ash was at its eye level and unarmed. Ash saw his reflection in its stare, dirty and misty-eyed and so, so tired. He reached out a hand toward it, and Munchlax flinched.

"To you, I'm the monster, huh." He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "What the hell am I gonna do with you?"

Ivy finished stitching up a deep gash in a woman's shoulder blade and

took a moment to lean on a stainless steel table to catch her breath. She'd been helping out Professor Oak and his assistants all night tending to the wounded. There were so many people in need to medical assistance, and she was in no position to be performing professional medical treatment. But Stanley and the other assistants were knowledgeable and efficient teachers. It didn't take any degree of exceptional skill to sew someone's skin back together, after all.

Gary had taken on a leadership role in the emergency, directing assistants and overseeing procedure to ensure an orderly sequence of events. No patient was left unaccounted for, and no one was standing idle for long. He seemed to know a fair amount about medicine, be it people or Pokémon, and no one really questioned his judgment. Ivy did as she was instructed and helped out wherever she could. By the time Ash showed up, she'd been on her feet for a good eight or nine hours without reprieve.

"You've been gone a while," she said when he finally trudged into the lab. She got a whiff of him and crinkled her nose. "Been mucking around a swamp?"

"Well, I'd take a shower but I think my water supply's all over the front yard."

She joined him outside and they leaned against the wall under the shade. Pikachu was still out of its Pokéball and napping at Ash's feet.

"No Pokéball?"

"Nah. Pikachu seems to like being outside. To be honest, I could use the company about now."

There was a pause as they settled into a comfortable silence. Ivy bit her lip. "Ash, your Mom's still in a coma. Professor Oak says there's no telling if or when she'll wake up."

Ash said nothing for a long while. When she glanced over at him, she noticed that his eyes were closed and he was breathing deeply.

"Sad, huh?" he said. "How we can't do anything when it really matters. There's always gonna be something or someone out there bigger and badder, and there's always gonna be collateral."

She put a hand on his shoulder, startling him. "That just means you have to get stronger. Yeah, there's bad company out there, but everyone's got a weakness—you just have to find it and never give up

until you do."

"...Okay? Where'd that come from?"

Ivy retracted her hand and crossed her arms. "Whatever, forget I said anything."

Ash was about to press her, but Gary and Professor Oak found them outside and waved.

"There you are," Professor Oak said. "Listen, I'm going to have to head to Rustboro City to get this device analyzed." He held up a glass container holding the strange machinery they'd found attached to the Snorlax. It was still wriggling and trying to escape. "I have an old friend there who works at Devon Corporation. He should have access to the technology we'll need to properly analyze this. Hopefully even find out where it came from."

"Rustboro? That's all the way in Hoenn," Gary said.

"Yes, all the more reason for me to leave as soon as possible. And you and Ash should get going, too."

"What? You can't really expect us to go running around the continent with my mom in a coma. I'm sorry, but I can't leave her," Ash said.

"My boy, there's nothing more you can do for her like this. The fact is, she and many others need medical attention in a hospital that isn't falling apart all around them. Which is why I want you to request assistance from the Gym in Viridian City. They should have the resources we'll need to help these people."

"And I guess you want us to run around the continent filling out the Pokédex after that, huh? Professor, I'm *not* leaving her."

Gary steered Ash away in the direction of town. "C'mon. Let's take a walk."

"Dude, I'm not leaving—"

"Yeah, I heard you the first time. But think about it..."

Their conversation was lost as they walked away. Ivy bit her lip and peered back inside the lab. "Speaking of leaving, it's time I got outta here, too."

"Ah, actually, I'd like to have a word with you. Please, come with me."

Professor Oak indicated the lab and smiled warmly. Ivy shrugged and decided to humor him. He led her to the back down a set of stairs. The basement was intact down to the fragile, glass test tubes on the shelves.

"This room is reinforced in case of catastrophes like last night's fiasco," Professor Oak explained.

"No offense, Professor, but I've hung around here long enough already."

He rummaged around in a desk drawer near the back of the room. "Yes, and I thank you again for your assistance. I think things would have been much worse without you here." He found what he was looking for and held it out for her to see. "Here we are. Ivy, do you know what this is?"

It was small and red. A computer of some kind, if she had to guess. "I have a feeling you'll enlighten me."

Professor Oak chuckled. "Yes, of course. This is a Pokédex. It's a high-tech encyclopedia of sorts, except this one is meant to catalogue any and all information related to Pokémon. It's my latest invention."

"Okay, and what does that have to do with me?"

"You see, I've tasked Gary and Ash with completing the Pokédex by traveling across Kanto and observing Pokémon in their natural states. There's so much we don't know. Even the few of us who've dedicated our lives to studying Pokémon have barely scratched the surface. Take those Snorlax last night, for example. We know Snorlax to be capable of extreme violence, but their usual temperaments make them docile and lassitudinous. They rarely venture down from the mountains, so the overall threat is quite low. Do they hibernate? How do they raise their young? What could have caused them to lash out at us so violently without provocation? These are just a few of the millions and millions of questions to which we don't have answers. By recording local information in the Pokédex, I'm confident my and others' studies can advance far beyond where they are now. And that in turn will help us better survive in this monstrous world."

"That's very nice, but it's not really my problem."

Professor Oak smiled knowingly. "Will it be your problem when your Larvitar is finished evolving? How will you handle it? How will your other Pokémon adapt to their new companion? Like I said, Larvitar

are usually temperamental and hostile. Imagine what a Tyranitar will be like. These are things you'll need to think about as a trainer. This," he indicated the Pokédex, "contains all my research. It includes all known species living in Kanto and Johto, with the capacity for expansion as I integrate my colleagues' research in distant regions like Unova and Kalos. How would you like access to all that information?"

Ivy crossed her arms and considered this for a moment. "Okay, I'll bite. But if what you're saying about this little computer's true, it could be pretty dangerous in the wrong hands. You don't even know me. I could be a spy from the Johto Resistance Movement."

"I considered that possibility, and in the end it doesn't matter if you are or not. You stepped in to help Ash and later the town. I don't think any enemy of Kanto would do such a thing. That's enough insight into your character for me."

She shrugged. "If you say so. What's the catch?"

"Catch?"

"Look, I wasn't born yesterday. You obviously want something in return. That's why you didn't bring Ash and Gary down here."

"Well, now that you mention it, there is something I'd like to ask of you. I imagine you're traveling north toward Viridian. May I ask why?"

"You may, and I may choose not to answer."

"But you are headed north."

Ivy said nothing. Professor Oak smirked.

"And since you'll be going in the same direction anyway, I want you to accompany Gary and Ash at least until your paths no longer converge. They've been trainers for a while, but they've never traveled in the wilds alone. You, on the other hand, came all the way here from Johto."

Ivy set her jaw. "I'm not a babysitter."

"No, and I'm sure whatever or whoever you're running from would prefer to catch you alone."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No, just telling you what I see. When you're as old as I am, you start to hear what people aren't telling you. Take this." He handed her the Pokédex. "Go with the boys. And trust me when I say you'll need them as much as they'll need you."

Ivy pocketed the Pokédex. "I'm not making any promises."

"Unfortunately, neither can I. All we can do now is keep moving forward until we get to the bottom of this."

He moved past her and headed back upstairs.

"Professor," she called. "That device. You shouldn't show it to anyone you don't trust implicitly. Wrong hands, and all."

"I appreciate the warning. I'm sure this won't be the last time we cross paths."

He disappeared upstairs, and Ivy took a shaky breath. The Pokédex added a noticeable weight to her pocket.

"I better not regret this."

She headed back upstairs to find Professor Oak mounting a Pidgeot while Ash and Gary looked on.

"I don't know how long this will take. I'm counting on you to call in help from Viridian and to fill out the Pokédex," Professor Oak said. "The three of you."

"Gramps, we're more than capable of doing this just the two of us—"

"I don't want to hear any complaints, Gary. And I have to go. Pidgeot!"

The giant bird spread its wings and beat the air until it was airborne. Ivy shrank back behind the crumbling lab wall and covered her ears and squeezed her eyes shut. Professor Oak waved from above and took off toward the east.

"This is ridiculous," Gary said. "There's no reason we have to take her with us. We're not babysitters."

"Ivy?" Ash wandered back toward the lab and found her crouched on the floor with her hands over her ears and eyes shut tight. "Whoa, hey, you okay?"

One, two, three, four, five...

She focused on counting to ten and back to calm her racing heart and the tremors racking her body. Ash's hands closed around her wrists and pulled them away. She blinked, unseeing, as she tried to focus on his face. Confused, lurid eyes peered at her from inches away.

"Hey, what's wrong? Why're you on the ground shaking?"

"Is it gone?"

"Is what gone?"

"Is it gone?!"

Gary had his hands in his pockets and he stood behind Ash. "What, you mean Gramps and his Pidgeot?"

Ivy clenched her fists and tried to wrench away from Ash, but he held on.

"You're afraid of birds? Is that it?"

"I'm..."

His expression softened and he smiled. "It's okay, Pidgeot's gone. Right, Pikachu?"

Ash's Pikachu sniffed around Ivy's shin and peered up at her, curious. Her heart rate began to even out again slowly, and the pounding in her ears lessened. She took a few minutes to recover and compose herself.

"It's gone?"

"Yeah. C'mon, lemme help you up."

She got to her feet with Ash's help. Her knees wobbled, but he helped her stand until she'd regained her balance.

"Thanks."

"So, you're ornithophobic." Gary stood just a short ways away, his expression carefully blank. "What happened?"

She swallowed and met his challenging gaze. "Bad experience when I was a kid."

"What kind of experience?"

"None of your business."

"Right. And Gramps wondered why I don't want you coming with us."

"Aw, Gary, lay off. It's a personal thing, right? 'Sides, I trust Professor Oak's judgment. It'd be cool to have another trainer around to watch our backs."

"I said no, Ash."

"It's not really your call to make." Ivy fished the Pokédex out of her pocket and held it up for them for see. "Look, now I'm *just like you*."

"Oh sweet, he gave you a Pokédex? Wait, why's yours red? I didn't know they came in red." Ash produced his Pokédex, which was green.

"I don't care if he gave you a Pokédex. He entrusted Ash and me with the mission, not you," Gary said.

Ivy shrugged. "Listen, I'm headed north anyway. What're you gonna do, ignore me the whole way there? I don't think even your stick is that far up your ass."

Gary narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips.

"Hey, Ivy, you think we could trade Pokédexes? I mean, you know, if red's not your favorite color I'd be happy to take it off your hands." Ash reached for her Pokédex.

"One problem with your proposal: I don't trust you. What if you decide to rob us in our sleep?" Gary said.

Ivy rolled her eyes. "Please, if I wanted to rob you I would've done it already. Oh, wait." She reached into her back pocket and produced a brown, leather wallet. "I already did."

Gary padded his pockets and snarled. "What the— When did you do that?"

"Not that I don't like green or anything. Gary's eyes are actually a nice greenish color. Well, not in this light. N-Not that they don't look nice or whatever! Haha..." Ash took off his cap and held it in front of him like a shield.

"Don't get your panties in a twist." Ivy handed the wallet back to Gary. "See? If that's not trustworthy, then I really don't know what is."

"Last time I checked, stealing a man's wallet isn't the way into his good graces."

She ran a hand over the neckline of his shirt and looked up at him through her eyelashes. "Depends on who you ask."

Gary recoiled, but Ivy pulled away and pushed past him. Ash followed.

"Aw, c'mon, Ivy. It's not like the red one's got your name on it!"

The three of them marched outside.

"Listen, I'm going north whether you like it or not," Ivy said. "If you wanna tag along, then fine. So long as you don't slow me down."

Gary looked ready to pull his hair out. "Wait a minute, you're tagging along with *us*, not the other way around."

"Guys?" Ash said.

"*What*!?" Ivy and Gary both whirled on him. Pikachu scampered behind his legs to hide.

"Let's eat before we head out. I'm pretty hungry."

Gary shook his head. "No, no, there's no 'we'."

"I could eat," Ivy said. "I wonder if anyone's shower's still working."

"Yeah, I think Daisy said hers was okay!" Ash started leading her toward Gary's house. "Oh, and about the Pokédex..."

"What? Oh, yeah, whatever, we can trade."

"Really? Awesome!"

Gary had no choice but to follow. "Hey, I never said anyone could use my shower. Hey!"

Ivy and Ash ignored him, and Daisy welcomed them into the house. The journey ahead would be long and arduous, and they weren't about to start without having lunch first.

2. Viridian Forest

Triumvirate, chapter 2: Viridian Forest
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon
Notes: Just a reminder that Ash, Gary, and Ivy are based on *canon characters from the manga: Red, Blue, and Green.* Yes, I'm changing their names to the English anime counterparts where applicable and incorporating animeverse elements in this fic, but the characters are based on the manga characters.

The road to Viridian City was long but flat. The trio made good time hiking, the weather was fair, and so far there had been no further bickering between Ivy and Gary. They walked loosely side by side with Ash in the middle and Pikachu at his side. It seemed like the mood wasn't going to get any better than this, so now was as good a time as any to tell them—

"By the way, Ivy," Gary said. "When Gramps pulled out that device from the Snorlax, you looked surprised."

"Forgive me for being shocked about seeing some weird tech embedded in a Pokémon's *brain*."

Or not.

Ash sighed.

"Normally I'd agree with you there, but then you said something that got me curious. I think it was something like 'chimera'?"

"I don't know, was it?"

"Yeah, it was. You wanna tell us what that means? 'Cause from where I was standing, you looked spooked. Like you recognized the tech."

Ash jogged ahead and walked backwards to face them. "Guys, c'mon. I thought we were past this."

"If you have something to say to me, then say it," Ivy said. "I'm a big girl. I can *handle* it."

"All right, fine." Gary stopped walking. "I wanna know where you came from and what you're doing here. You're a long way from home, and I get the feeling you want it to stay that way."

Ivy put her hands on her hips. "And explain to me why any of that is your business?"

"Because I've got a right to know who's sleeping next to me. You know something about those Snorlax that attacked, so don't insult my intelligence by pretending otherwise."

"Wait, you know something about the Snorlax?" Ash said.

Ivy shook her head. "No, okay, I don't know anything about those Snorlax except that they tried to kill us and we stopped them."

"You're dodging the question," Gary said. "God, you know, this just makes me think you're on the wrong side of all this even more."

"Ivy?" Ash said.

She looked between the two of them. "You don't need to know why I'm here, you just *want* to know. I'll tell you what you need to know, and that's that I'm not on the so-called wrong side, as you put it. I helped you fight the Snorlax. And Ash, I helped you get away from that Raticate. Professor Oak entrusted me with a Pokédex and asked me to help you. I'm not here to cheat you or kill you in your sleep, or something crazy like that. And I'm not here to rob you." She gave Gary a flippant once-over. "You make it too easy, and honestly, I prefer a *little* challenge."

Ash coughed to cover up a laugh, and Gary shot him a dirty look.

"Look, the point is I'm not prying into your shit, so I don't want you prying into mine. It's not like I'm here interrogating you about that training you did in Johto."

"You don't know anything about that," Gary said.

"Exactly, and I don't *care*. So drop it already."

Ivy pushed past the two of them and continued down the path. Viridian City loomed in the distance a stone's throw away. Gary muttered something under his breath and tailed after Ivy. Ash watched them go.

"So, I guess this isn't a good time to tell you guys I caught a Munchlax?" he called.

Gary whirled. "You did *what*?"

By the time they'd checked in at the Pokémon Center in Viridian City and scrounged up some dinner, Ash was exhausted. Gary let him know just how idiotic toting around a Munchlax was, especially after the Snorlax attack. Worse, Ivy agreed with him. After those painful five minutes of hearing Gary tear him apart, there was complete silence the rest of the way to Viridian City. Now, the three of them sat together in the room they'd rented out for the night, still not speaking.

Ivy sat with her Umbreon, which was busy licking itself clean. The Pokémon Professor Oak had bequeathed to Gary, an Eevee, was also out and staring curiously at Umbreon. Ash couldn't take the silence anymore, so he got up off his bed, picked a Pokéball from his belt, and released Munchlax into the middle of the room.

As soon as it appeared, Gary choked on his drink and startled Eevee, who scuttled behind him to hide. Umbreon ceased cleaning itself and stared at Munchlax, its hair standing on end.

"Ash, what the hell do you think you're doing?" Ivy hissed.

Munchlax slumped over and began to tremble. Ash kneeled down next to it and it buried its face in his thigh.

"You guys wouldn't listen to me when I tried to explain, so I'm trying a more hands-on approach." He gently put a hand on Munchlax's head, and it flinched. "Look, it's just afraid. It's just a baby."

"A baby whose psycho parents nearly killed your mom," Gary said. "Ash, come on. Snorlax are dangerous. They're not meant to be tamed by people."

"Wow, coming from a guy who wants to understand Pokémon? Don't you think that starts with, oh, I dunno, *understanding*? Does this little guy look dangerous to you?"

"It's not like that," Ivy said.

"Then what's it like?" He pulled off his cap. "When I found Munchlax, I pulled a knife on it. I was gonna kill it, like a wild animal. But then I took a fucking second to look at it, and I saw fear. Loneliness. It just lost its parents, like I lost my mom. It's just scared and alone, and innocent."

"It won't be so innocent when it gets bigger," Ivy said.

"Yeah, well, I'm gonna prove you wrong. Both of you. Professor Oak wanted us to complete the Pokédex because we don't know a whole lot about Pokémon, right? Well, what if this is the key to understanding something about Snorlax? What if I can raise this little guy and train it not to want to kill humans when it wakes up from a nap?"

"And what if you can't?" Gary shot back. "What if it blows up in your face, and one day when that thing's not so little, it turns on you?"

"Well, then I guess you'll be able to say 'I told you so' and laugh at my dead ass."

Munchlax continued to quiver in fear. Pikachu sniffed its back, curious.

"Right, well, I'm gonna give Munchlax some food. I bet it hasn't eaten in a while." Ash reached for the food they'd purchased for dinner and selected a hunk of Pidgey breast. He set the plate down in front of Munchlax and waited.

Munchlax sniffed the food and began to drool.

"It's okay," Ash said gently. "Here." He put his cap over Munchlax's head, and it hung off the cub's ear.

Munchlax didn't need much coaxing to dig into its dinner, and it began tearing at the food with stubby fingers and small, sharp teeth. Ash scratched the back of its head.

"See? It's not dangerous."

Umbreon jumped down from the bed and sniffed at Munchlax's food. Munchlax growled, but Umbreon didn't seem to be bothered. It snatched a bite of meat from the mess Munchlax was making and trotted off to consume it in peace.

"For the record, I'm definitely gonna say 'I told you so' if this backfires," Gary said. "And I *will* laugh at your dead ass when I do it."

"So, we've got a Munchlax now," Ivy said. "How 'bout that."

"Just gimme some time to raise it. I know I can do this."

Gary watched Ash, thoughtful. "I guess you'd be the only one who could." Before anyone could respond to that, Gary got up and picked

Eevee up. "I'm going for a walk."

He left without another word. Ivy slipped off the bed and settled down next to Umbreon as it finished its snack. She scratched it behind the ear and earned a rumbling purr in return.

"That Umbreon really likes you," Ash said.

"Yeah, we've been together for a long time."

Pikachu nibbled at the shredded remains of Munchlax's meal while Munchlax began to look around the room.

"What's a long time?"

Ivy gave him a look, and he put up his hands in a placating gesture.

"It's just a question. I just, well, we don't know much about you. And it's kinda hard to be friends when I don't even know what your favorite color is."

Ivy leaned back on her hands. "Green. My favorite color is green."

"Cool. Mine's red, obviously." He grinned and indicated the red jacket he wore.

Ivy's expression softened. "Umbreon's been with me for almost five years now. When she was still an Eevee, I got her as a gift."

"Really? Musta been someone close to you."

Ivy averted her gaze. "It was a long time ago."

Ash shook his head. "Man, you really are like a wall of ice and, like, steel and other hard things. But it's cool. I know it won't be like this forever."

"You say that like you know it's true."

"Well, sure. Kinda hard not to know things about your friends."

Munchlax had taken to ambling about the room smelling things and poking anything in reach. It suddenly found itself right next to Ivy and jumped in surprise.

"I'll be damned. It really is just a baby."

Munchlax was watching her carefully, but it wasn't backing away.

"Go on," Ash said.

Ivy slowly reached out and patted Munchlax on the nose. It made a grunting noise and sneezed. She yanked back her hand, but it was already coated in a sheen of spit and mucous. Ash burst out laughing and fell backward onto his back.

"Lovely." Ivy got up and headed for the bathroom.

Ash was still laughing and failed to hear her colorful expletives as she realized the mucous was going to be a bitch to scrub out of her shirt.

The next morning, Gary woke up early to get to the Gym and see about requesting provisions and professional medical assistance for Pallet Town's injured. He jumped in the shower while Ivy and Ash were still snoring away in their beds. Once dressed, he thought about going back to the room to wake Ash, but thought better of it in the end. By the time Gary had returned from his walk the night before, Ash and Ivy had already turned in for the night and Gary was still not sold on Munchlax joining the team, no matter what Ash said.

Outside, the air was warm and humid and the sun was lazily breaching the eastern horizon. It was a little early, but the people of Pallet Town couldn't wait. Hands in his pockets, he followed the main road to the Gym. A few people were out and about going for morning jogs and grocery shopping. Viridian was as green as its name. Trees grew in the middle of streets and created natural roundabouts. Ivy vines crept up the sides of the red, brick buildings he passed, giving the place a rustic look, almost academic. Even the air was fresh with the scent of cut grass and whatever flower was in season. Restaurants were opening, and their smells tempted Gary's stomach more than the lush greenery. Breakfast would have to wait until after his business was finished, though.

He turned to the left at the end of the street, and the Viridian City Pokémon Gym came into view. It was a large, imposing structure reminiscent of a refurbished warehouse. As with the rest of the buildings in town, the Gym was built of red brick and covered in creeping ivy. Inside there would be an arena large enough to accommodate even the bulkiest Pokémon for training purposes. As he approached, however, he noticed a few people standing around outside the Gym dressed in uniforms talking to a plain clothes woman.

"Please, I must speak with the Gym Leader. It's my daughter, she's been gone for three days and I'm afraid something terrible has happened to her!" the woman was saying.

One of the uniformed men spoke for the group. "Sorry, ma'am, but I can't let you in."

"But why not? I need help!"

"You're going to have to leave now."

The other uniformed men and women stepped forward to prove a point, and the woman backtracked on instinct.

"But I don't understand. The Gym Leader's supposed to help us."

The first uniformed man produced a wad of cash from his pocket and tossed it at her. "For your trouble. Sorry about your daughter."

The woman didn't even bother taking the cash, and it began to scatter across the road. "You think money can do anything? What's wrong with you people? My daughter's out there with god knows what else!"

"Like I said, you'll have to leave. My friend here'll escort you home."

One of the uniformed men grabbed the woman by the arm and manhandled her down the side street over her protests.

Gary watched the entire exchange. Confused, he walked closer to get a better look, but all of a sudden someone crashed into him from the right and shoved him into an alley. Gary hit a trashcan and scraped his hand on the brick wall, but he kept himself from falling over.

"Ow! What the— Ivy?"

She was peering around the corner of the alley a little out of breath. "Shh! I don't think they saw you, but keep your voice down."

"You pushed me." Gary righted himself and yanked her back by the arm with his uninjured hand. "You wanna tell me what the hell's going on?"

"Those guys in the uniforms are members of Team Rocket. Any idea why they'd be congregating around the Gym?"

"Team Rocket? You mean the guys that've been buying up land all over the continent?"

"Among other things."

"What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is there's no reason for them to be here unless they've got an interest in the area. How much do you know about them?"

"Just that they showed up a few years ago and started buying up land. Farmland, urban real estate, that kind of thing. They build low-income housing and they expanded crop distribution across the continent. Some might call them humanitarians."

Ivy yanked her arm free. "Some, but not all."

Gary peered down at her and thought carefully about his words. "I hear they recently got into the trash business. It might seem harmless, but it smells a little fishy. I don't trust any kind of organization that proclaims to be helping people by taking over huge chunks of their lives to turn a profit."

"I'm almost jealous that your suspicious nature isn't just for my benefit."

He ignored the backhanded jibe. "You talk like you know something about them. I said I didn't trust them. I didn't say I thought they were the scum of the earth or evil or something ridiculous like that."

Ivy returned to the edge of the alley and peered around the corner at the Gym. "Maybe you should."

Before he could press her for more information, she turned back to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "I need to get into that Gym, and so do you. I have an idea of how we can do that, but I need you to trust me. Think you can handle that?"

"What're you even talking about? Let's just go to the Gym. It's not an exclusive club, and Gym Leaders are supposed to protect their jurisdictions. It's their job."

Ivy squeezed his shoulder to the point of aching. "Gary, just listen to me right now. I need you to let me handle this. If you want to help the people back in Pallet Town, you need to follow my lead and play along. ...Please."

Gary hesitated. He prided himself on being a decent judge of character, but Ivy had only ever set off alarm bells. Right now, she

was so earnest and almost desperate that he couldn't summon his usual passive-aggressive skepticism. She was hiding something, but perhaps the only way to find out what was to let her do this.

"Fine," he relented. "We'll do it your way."

Relief flooded her face and she nodded. "Thank you." She pulled her long hair back into a ponytail and shrugged off her green jacket, which she left on top of the trashcan. "Just...do your usual constipated face and look mean, and we'll be good."

"My what? I don't look *constipated*—"

"Come on!"

She grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the Gym. The Rocket Grunts saw them coming and fell into a horizontal line, a clear signal that no one was getting past them. Ivy slipped her arm around Gary's and held him close.

"What the hell?" he hissed.

"Look mean, don't *be* mean," she hissed back.

The Rocket that had told the woman from before to leave stepped forward and held out his hand to stop their progress. He was a lean, short guy with a bad dye job.

"Stop right there, you two. No one gets in the Gym."

Ivy gasped and tugged on Gary's arm. "Honey, look, it's those heroes in black! Oooh, this is the best birthday surprise *ever*!"

Gary had a hard time not throwing up at the change in her. Ivy spoke with a slightly higher pitched drawl that only earplugs could make sound cute and charming. Even her body language made her look dainty and fragile as she leaned her weight on him and fluffed her ponytail.

"Heroes?" the Rocket Grunt said. "Well, I *have* been called that before."

"Oh my goodness, he talked to me! Honey, did you hear that?"

Ivy tugged on Gary's arm and he took that as his cue to grunt in affirmation. She smiled wide and made some kind of squealing sound, and he just about lost his composure right there.

The Rocket Grunt grinned and held out a hand. "The name's Butch. And you don't look like you're from around here, little lady. What can I do for you?"

Ivy took his hand in both of hers and shook it emphatically. "Oh, Butch! I just *love* that name, so manly and strong."

If she wasn't hunching over like she couldn't stand on her own, Ivy's three or four inches of height over Butch may have been a bit more obvious.

Gary crossed his arms. "We came to see the Gym Leader."

Butch caught his eye over Ivy's shoulder. "Oh, well that's not gonna be possible, man."

"Oooh, don't listen to my honey. He can be so serious and scary!" Ivy cooed. "Besides, who needs some stuffy old Gym Leader when you guys're here to protect the city?"

The other Rocket Grunts chuckled and whispered amongst themselves. Butch returned his attention to Ivy and flashed her a smile.

"O' course we're here to protect the city. Since the Leader's not in right now, you can count on us to look after things."

"Aw, see? I knew you were heroes! If you ask me, the Gym Leader can just stay on vacation so long as you're here~" Ivy ran her hand down Butch's chest playfully.

How the fuck is this guy falling for her? Gary thought to himself.

"Vacation? Nah, the Leader's away on business in Johto til the end of the month. You know, it's all work and no play for him," Butch said.

"But that's so far away! I hope you boys have more time to play instead of work."

Butch laughed. "We try."

Gary cleared his throat and Ivy winked back at him.

"Aw, my honey's getting hungry, I can tell. It was *so* nice to meet you and your friends, Butch. I hope we see you again~"

"Sure thing. And happy birthday."

Ivy blushed and made that awful squealing noise again. Gary had to look away lest the Rocket Grunts notice the disgust on his face.

"Okay, bye now!"

Ivy latched herself onto Gary's arm again and he practically had to carry her away from the Gym. When they got back to the alley where she'd left her jacket, she released him and retrieved it. Her sweet smile was gone, and her eyes were far away and deep in thought. There was no trace at all of the dainty femme-fatale.

"So the Gym Leader's gone and for some reason, he left Team Rocket in charge," she said. "Damnit, I had a feeling something like this would happen."

Gary followed her through the alley until they came out on another street.

"Wait a minute, what the hell was that back there?"

Ivy produced something from her pocket and began to flip through it. It was a wallet, and it had enough cash in it to buy enough meals for a month.

"You stole his *wallet*?"

She ignored him as she pocketed the cash and looked through the rest of the wallet's contents. "Looks like our friend Butch was just a Grunt, no one important. That means there's gotta be an Admin here running things. But what's the connection with the Gym Leader? Could he be in league with them? Or is he a victim?"

Gary took the wallet from her and threw it in a nearby trashcan.

"Hey! I wasn't done with that."

He grabbed her by the arm and forced her to look up at him. "What was that back there? And don't give me that bullshit about needing to know and wanting to know. You owe me an explanation."

Ivy sighed. "*Fine*, you caught me. I'm a con artist and a thief. Happy?"

She pulled away and continued walking in the direction of the Pokémon Center on the other side of town.

"No, I'm not happy. I already knew you were a thief. *Ivy*." He stepped in front of her and didn't let her pass. "What's your connection with

Team Rocket? And why did you want to go to the Gym in the first place?"

She watched him for a moment, expression unreadable. She produced the cash she'd pocketed from Butch's wallet and handed him a few bills. "This'll feed us for a while. I suggest we get outta this city as soon as possible before Butch and his buddies realize we duped them. They know both our faces now."

"You're not answering my questions, and honestly? I'm about ready to start asking with something a little more forceful than words." His hand hovered over the Pokéballs at his belt.

Ivy looked around them briefly and licked her lips. "Don't threaten me. Believe me, this is one rabbit hole you don't want to crawl down. There's no way out."

He searched her eyes and tried to find some hint of the lie he knew was buried underneath, a crack he could exploit. But there was nothing. She only looked tired.

"What are you so afraid of?"

She swallowed and held his gaze. "I'm not afraid. I just have a very good idea of what's out there, and I wouldn't wish that burden on anyone else." She stepped around him and continued walking toward the Pokémon Center. "C'mon, we have to get Ash and get outta here. Team Rocket'll be looking for us soon."

Gary watched her walk away. One way or another, he was going to get to the bottom of this. That, or he and Ash were going back to their original two-man team and the only place Ivy would be going was back across the ocean to wherever she came from. He would make sure of that.

Ash once again found himself walking in between Gary and Ivy as they proceeded north out of Viridian City. He'd woken up to find himself alone. So he did the only thing that made sense: he went in search of food. After buying breakfast at a nearby restaurant for himself and for Gary and Ivy whenever they chose to show up, he went back to the room and packed up his things. That was when Ivy and Gary burst through the door and started shoving clothes into backpacks like they would get up and run off otherwise.

"Time to leave," Gary had said by way of explanation.

Ash asked about going to the Gym and getting help for Pallet Town, but Gary said it wasn't happening and they had to leave immediately. Ivy said something about getting supplies and went downstairs to the PokéMart. Within twenty minutes, they were back on the road and no one was speaking.

Ash sighed and glance back at the city as it shrank with their departure. "Guys, come on. I dunno what happened this morning, but my mom and the other people in Pallet Town are way more important that your bad blood. So someone better explain what's goin' on right now."

Gary walked in front and didn't look back. "Why don't you ask Ivy? Since you seem to have better luck getting her to talk."

Ivy rolled her eyes. "Don't act like this is all my fault. It's not like I had anything to do with the Gym Leader being out of town."

"Out of town?" Ash said. "Then who're we gonna get to help the people in Pallet Town?"

Gary sighed. "We'll just have to go north to Pewter. Pallet's not in their jurisdiction, but I hear the Gym Leader's a reasonable guy."

"Okay, but why the rush? I mean, I wanna hurry up and get help, too, but this morning you guys looked like the roof was on fire or something."

"Long story short, Gary and I had a little run-in with some Team Rocket goons and now they're probably pretty mad I stole all their money. So best to get a head start on them," Ivy said.

"Team Rocket? You mean those groupies in black spandex? I get a weird vibe from them."

"My point exactly."

Gary muttered something under his breath, but Ash didn't make it out.

"Wait, you guys didn't say there was a forest between Viridian and Pewter," Ivy said.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, Viridian Forest. It's huge," Ash said.

Gary stopped a few steps from the mouth of the forest and looked up at the trees. They were much taller than the few they'd passed on their

way out of town. "Going around would slow us down days, maybe even a week."

"No way, we have to get help for my mom and the others." Ash pushed past him and reached for a Pokéball at his hip. "Hey, Ivy, I'm really sorry, but Pidgeotto'll be a big help in here with the Bugs. You okay with that?"

Ivy looked between Ash and the forest that faded to shadows the deeper she looked. "No, but I don't have a choice. Going around the forest isn't an option."

Ash nodded and released Pidgeotto. It flew to a high branch and cooed, its sharp eyes peering into the shadows. Ivy swallowed and clenched and unclenched her fists.

"This place'll be crawling with Weedle and other poisonous Bug Pokémon," Gary said. "I don't plan on getting stung."

He reached for a Pokéball at his hip and released Growlithe. It barked and trotted in a circle around his feet with its tongue hanging out.

"Aw, hey buddy." Ash kneeled down and ruffled Growlithe's fur. "Ready to fry some Bugs?"

"Not unless it's absolutely necessary," Gary said.

Another Pokéball flashed with light and Ivy's Houndour stretched out on the grass. As soon as it saw Growlithe, it snarled and crouched. Growlithe swished its fluffy tail and began to circle.

"My other buddy!" Ash smiled at Houndour and reached out a palm for it to sniff.

"Two noses are better than one," Ivy said. "Let's get moving."

Gary led the way with Growlithe, while Pidgeotto hopped overhead from branch to branch searching for Bugs to devour. Ash and Pikachu were in the middle, and Ivy brought up the rear with Houndour. Almost immediately, Houndour and Growlithe wandered off the path to take in the surroundings. They kept an eye on each other and gave each other a wide berth, occasionally growling if one came too close to the other.

The canopy was so thick that the sunlight fought a losing battle to shine onto the forest floor. As a result, most of the green vegetation

had migrated up the tree trunks, while shorter grass, dead leaves, and innumerable varieties of fungus covered the forest floor. It smelled damp, like clothes that are left too long in the washing machine.

"Hey, check it out. It's a Metapod!"

A large, green pupa was suspended in the air above. It hung from a branch on a thin, silk string. Ash whipped out his Pokédex and scanned it with the built-in laser pointer. Ivy peered over his shoulder as the Pokédex screen lit up with the captured image. Ash punched a button and the screen switched to a page of text in the form of an academic report about Metapod.

"Looks like Professor Oak's got Metapod pretty much covered," Ash said.

"It says Metapod only spend about a week in their cocoons before evolving into Butterfree," Ivy read over his shoulder.

"Sweet!" Ash fished around his pocket for a new Pokéball and threw it at Metapod. With a flash of light, Metapod disappeared and the Pokéball dropped to the forest floor. Ash picked it up and smiled. "Gotcha."

"Are you done? We need to keep moving." Gary was already pressing ahead and leaving them behind.

"He's right," Ivy said.

"Okay, I know something's definitely weird when you're agreeing with Gary. When're you guys gonna tell me what's goin' on?"

Ivy averted her gaze. "I know you guys have a lot of questions, but I'm asking you...as a friend. Please, just let it go, at least for now. I don't wanna drag you into something you'll regret later."

Ash put a hand on her shoulder and smiled. "Okay. That's all I needed to hear."

"...Really?"

"Really." He turned to keep walking. "Oh, and when you *are* ready to share, I'll be ready to listen. And I know Gary will, too."

After a little while, he heard her footsteps following at a distance and grinned to himself. Pikachu was perched on his shoulder and nuzzled

his ear, which sent a low-voltage shock of static electricity down his arm.

"I know, buddy. I'm always right about this stuff."

A hunk of green blood dripped down from the canopy and landed at Ivy's feet. Half of a Weedle carcass soon followed. Its legs were still twitching. Above, Ash's Pidgeotto was happily scarfing down Weedle's other half. Ivy repressed a shiver.

"As if I didn't have a good enough reason to hate birds already," she muttered to herself.

It was cool and humid the deeper they wandered into the woods, and she was glad for her jacket. Houndour panted with its tongue out as it trotted next to her, having lost interest in Growlithe some time ago. Dusk was setting in, and with the canopy so thick, it already felt like the middle of the night. She held a makeshift torch in front of her, courtesy of Houndour, to light the path.

"I think we should stop for the night," Gary said from up ahead. "It's dangerous to keep hiking in the dark."

There wasn't a whole lot of room on the forest floor, but they managed to light a fire and roll out their sleeping bags. Once the last of the light had faded, night's chill set in like a cold front with a grudge. They huddled around the fire and roasted some of the food Ivy had purchased in Viridian City.

"Better let the others eat, too, huh Pikachu?" Ash said.

He released the rest of his Pokéballs all at once, revealing a stout Wartortle and an Ivysaur along with Munchlax. Gary followed his example and let Scyther, Eevee, and Golduck out.

"I guess it's a party," Ivy said. She let out Umbreon, but hesitated in releasing her last Pokémon.

"What's wrong?" Ash said.

"Nothing, just that it was in a bad accident. I got some really good treatment, but I haven't let Batty out since then."

"Batty?" Gary said.

"Just let it out," Ash said. "It's gotta eat."

Ivy nodded. "Yeah, you're right."

She released the Pokéball and a very large Golbat emerged. Its left wing was bandaged and splinted, and its left eye was also heavily bandaged. It crouched on the ground with its massive wings folded as it twitched and peered around. Ivy rose and held out a hand toward it.

"It's okay, Batty. You're safe."

Golbat's gigantic mouth opened and closed as it tasted the damp, night air. Ivy walked around to its left side and gently peeled back the bandage on its wing.

"Hey, looks like you're doing much better."

Gary approached and peered at the wing. "Broken wing?"

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"It doesn't matter. Batty's okay now."

She felt his gaze on her back and knew he wasn't satisfied with her evasive tactic. After she removed the bandage on Golbat's wing, she tested the one concealing its left eye. But when she pulled it away, there was nothing but an empty socket and a thick, jagged lesion sewn up with black stitches.

"Shit," Ash said.

Ivy ran a hand over Golbat's ear, and it shuddered. "It's okay. You're okay."

Golbat stretched its wings to test them, but decided against flying and took to hobbling on all fours as it followed its fellow Pokémon to search for food. Soon, everyone had found dinner. Ivysaur and Wartortle were munching on grass, while Pikachu stole some of Ash's food. Growlithe and Houndour had chased down a Nidoran and were now in a race to see which of them could rip it apart faster.

"That Golbat's pretty beat up," Gary said. "I don't suppose you're in the mood to share anything?"

Ivy put her food down and stared into the fire. "What happened to

Batty was a horrific attack. I'm the one who pulled it out of there."

"Out of where?"

"Gary, leave her alone," Ash said.

Gary snorted. "Right, what's one more secret, anyway?"

Umbreon curled up next to Ivy's lap once it had finished eating and went to sleep. It began to purr when Ivy started petting its back.

"It was Team Rocket," she said finally. "They broke Batty's wing and gouged out its eye. I saved it before it was too late."

"Team Rocket? Why?" Ash said.

Ivy shrugged, and Gary chuckled.

"You know, the way you keep your secrets I have a hard time thinking you're not trying to protect Team Rocket."

"I'm not," Ivy bit out. "Lemme remind you that my past's none of your business."

"Whatever. I'm going to sleep."

Ash nudged Ivy in the shoulder. "Don't worry about it."

They settled in for the night in sleeping bags with two shoulder lengths in between them. Even in thermal sleeping bags, with the campfire doused the frigid air seeped in and made Ivy shiver. Houndour curled up at her side like a natural heating pad, and she turned over to hold the bony canine close to her middle. It was going to be a long and miserable night.

After a night of nearly freezing to death with only Growlithe at his back to keep him warm, waking up inside a self-heating furnace was welcome for about two seconds. Then Gary realized how sweaty he was and jolted away. Blinking, he tried to sit up and got a mouthful of black hair.

"What the—"

He spit out a few hairs and struggled to unzip his sleeping bag. Ash, whom he'd somehow cuddled up to in the middle of the night in search of warmth, perhaps, jerked awake.

"W-What? What's going on? Where's the fight? Ew, why's it so sticky in here?"

"Ugh, gross." Gary continued to spit out hairs that weren't there. When he finally extricated himself from his sleeping bag, he looked up and saw Ivy sitting a little ways away changing her shirt. He stared, vision still blurry with sleep, and she caught him.

"Finally, you guys're awake." Clothed once again, she looked back at them over her shoulder. "We should get moving."

Above, Pidgeotto was already feasting on a Caterpie. Chunks of it dropped to the forest floor in between Ivy's and Ash's sleeping bags. Gary turned flushed, either from anger or embarrassment or some combination of the two, and hastily rolled onto his other side to get out of his sleeping bag.

"Pidgeotto's making me hungry," Ash said.

Ivy tossed him a granola bar. "Have at it, Champ."

While Ash happily gorged himself on trail mix, Gary packed up his gear without looking at anyone.

"How 'bout you?"

A pair of booted feet entered his vision and Gary scowled. Ivy was holding out another granola bar for him to take.

"I'm not hungry, thanks."

She leaned down and tapped his cheek with the bar. "Sure you are." Her lips curled in a smirk that made him want to punch her in the face. But she left him to his devices before he could get a chance to convince himself it would be worth it.

The trio finished packing up their things while munching on breakfast. Ash picked up Ivy's pack to toss to her, but he fumbled.

"Whoa, whatcha got in here, bricks?"

Ivy saw that he had her bag and quickly snatched it away. "No."

"Okay then..."

Packed and ready to go, they resumed their hike deeper into the forest. Gary took point again and Ivy brought up the rear, like before.

Pidgeotto hopped along above them, plucking stray Weedle and Caterpie from the treetops. The deeper they traveled, the thicker the dead vegetation on the forest floor became. After a couple of hours, the path became nearly impossible to traverse.

"Hold up," Gary said.

He reached for a Pokéball at his belt and released Scyther. The green mantis was of a height with him when it stood up on its hind legs. Scyther's translucent wings buzzed and it made clicking sounds as it looked around warily.

"Clear a path."

Scyther obeyed and began hacking and slashing with its wicked sabre-like appendages. It made short work of the clogged mulch and vines blocking the path, and soon the group was moving again, albeit at a slower pace.

Despite the early afternoon hour, the sun was barely visible through the treetops. No birds chirped, and no Bugs clicked or sang. The forest had fallen silent.

"Hey, are you sure this's the right way?" Ash called from a short way back.

"I'm sure."

"How sure?"

Gary rolled his eyes. "I'm following the map."

"How do you follow a map in a place where everything looks the same?"

Gary was about to say something snarky when he noticed a Bug crawling up a nearby trunk. He'd seen something like it before, but he couldn't remember where. Stopping, he pulled out his Pokédex and scanned it.

"Spinarak," he read aloud. "What're you doing all the way out here?"

"What is that?" Ash looked around him at the little green spider. "Haven't seen one of those before."

"What's the hold up?" Ivy stayed back a little ways, unwilling to get too close to Pidgeotto perched overhead.

Gary typed a note in the Pokédex about encountering a Spinarak in the Viridian Forest, then snapped it shut and slipped it back in his pocket. "Nothing. Let's keep moving."

Scyther eyed the Spinarak, but decided it wasn't worth it and resumed its hacking and slashing through the forest. They continued for another fifteen minutes or so until the temperature became noticeably warmer.

"Ew, what's that dank smell?" Ash said.

Gary smelled it too. Scyther finished hacking through a final bunch of thick vines and leaves, and on the other side the way was clear. Scyther hunched down and ruffled its wings as it crawled forward, alert.

"What the hell?"

Gary peered into the clearing, which was far larger than he'd expected. Old pieces of exoskeleton and unidentifiable bones littered the forest floor all through the clearing. He kneeled down and picked up a bleached bone.

"This is creepy," Ash said as he stepped on a hollow chunk of exoskeleton. "And did I mention gross?"

Growlithe and Houndour were busy sniffing the air and growling as they explored the clearing, while Pidgeotto flew to Ash's shoulder and perched there. It ruffled its feathers and cooed nervously.

"Oh my god." Gary walked toward a tree trunk where something like a large cocoon was stuck to it. He drew his hunting knife and moved closer to get a better look. The cocoon was spun from white silk and impossible to see through. Curious, Gary carefully began cutting through the shell with his knife and peeling back the many layers.

"Whoa." Ash pulled out his Pokédex and aimed it at the dead Bug he'd nearly stepped on. "Pinsir. I thought those things were s'posed to be at the top of the food chain."

The Pinsir, or what was left of it, was lying on the ground with one of its curved pincers snapped in half. Its body was mangled and missing a couple limbs, and black, viscous goo oozed from deep gashes in its carapace. Ash scrolled through the Pokédex for anything about natural predators, but this didn't look like the work of a Pidgeot or a Fearow. As far as he knew, they didn't live this deep in the forest. Pidgeotto

flapped its wings in distress at the sight of the mutilated Pinsir and hopped to the ground.

"Guys," Ivy said. She was at the edge of the clearing and looking up toward the tree tops. "We need to get outta here. Now."

Gary had managed to saw through the cocoon down to its base and was working on prying it open. "Whoa, crap!" He stumbled backward and narrowly avoided getting smacked in the face. A body—a human body—slumped forward out of the cocoon but didn't fall out completely.

"Oh." Ash winced. "Okay, gross was an understatement."

Ivy paced around the edge of the clearing, her eyes still skybound. "Guys, I'm serious over here."

Gary and Ash were busy examining the corpse. It was a young man, and judging from the gear he wore, he'd been out here looking for Bug Pokémon. His face was pale, like it had been drained of all its blood. Upon closer inspection, his clothing was ripped over his chest, revealing half a dozen large puncture wounds.

"God, that reeks." Ash covered his nose and mouth. "That looks like what I saw on the Pinsir back there."

Scyther hissed at the corpse and clicked its hidden fangs.

"Looks like he doesn't like the smell, either," Ash said.

Ivy jogged toward them. "Guys, hello? I said we need to get the hell out of here."

Gary was crouched down and examining the corpse's belt. "He had a Pokémon with him. I wonder if it's still alive."

He took the Pokéball and released it. A gaunt Nidorino appeared looking ready to fight. The poison-tipped quills on its back stood up on end as it bared its fangs in a menacing snarl.

"Whoa there." Gary put out his hands and slowly stood up. "I'm not here to hurt you, Nidorino. Easy."

Scyther hissed at Nidorino, and the two Pokémon faced off, each ready to lunge.

"Hey!" Ivy said. "If you two're done, we *really* need to get out of here."

They finally acknowledged her distress. Gary frowned. "What's the matter?"

Ivy grabbed their hair and yanked their heads back so they were forced to look up.

"*That* is."

Gary's eyes went wide as he took in the warped canopy. It was covered in fine, white silk spun into tunnels that disappeared into the trees. Large tunnels. Caught up in the webbing were various Pokémon, from fearsome Beedrill to tiny Nidoran. All were strung up, broken, and splattered with the same black poison that had killed the Bug catcher and Pinsir.

"What the hell is that?" Ash said.

Ivy released them. "Spider webs."

"But I didn't think Kakuna and Metapod could do something that big."

"It's not Kakuna and Metapod," Gary said. "That Spinarak I found before—"

"Spinarak?" Ivy interrupted. "Why didn't you say something?"

"It was just one. And besides, they're pretty rare in Kanto."

"No, there's never just one. And another thing? Spinarak aren't big enough to do that." She pointed up at the suspended web tunnels.

Ash swallowed hard. "So...what is?"

All of a sudden, Nidorino and Scyther abandoned their stand off and looked up. Nidorino beat the ground with its stubby front claws while Scyther ruffled its wings, ready to take off. Pikachu and Pidgeotto huddled closer to Ash in fear.

Shlip, shlip, shlip.

The canopy leaves began to shake as something approached from all directions. Ivy, Gary, and Ash huddled back to back with each other. Spinarak emerged from their nests in the canopy and slowly dropped from the webbing above on silk threads. Houndour and Growlithe spewed embers at them, and they fell in burning, black lumps one by one.

Shlip, shlip, shlip.

The thunderous footsteps drew closer and shadows blocked out what little light made it through the canopy. Gary clenched his jaw as a spike of fear traveled up his spine.

"Holy—!"

Spiders, red and yellow behemoths large enough for an adult human to ride, appeared at the mouths of the silken tunnels and sang a cacophony of clicking and hissing at the intruders in their nest. Their wicked jaws dripped black poison to the forest floor, where it smoked when it hit the ground and ate through whatever was unlucky enough to end up underneath it.

"Ariados," Ivy gasped. "A whole nest of them!"

There had to be about a dozen fully grown Ariados hovering above. They snapped their jaws and made awful sucking sounds, and soon they were lowering themselves to the ground to attack. Scyther took to the air with a screech and rammed the first Ariados to touch down on the ground. It sliced into the spider's armored abdomen like a knife through a feather pillow and buried its razor appendages inside to the hilt. With a screech, Scyther dug its maw into the Ariados and began to blend its insides and eat it alive. Ariados writhed and tried to wriggle free, but the green mantis's hold was ironclad.

Unfortunately, Scyther could only handle one spider at a time. The other five and their brood of tiny Spinarak set their sights on Ash, Gary, and Ivy. The closest Ariados reared back and spit a glob of poison at them, but Nidorino jumped and took the direct hit. It Tackled the attacking Ariados without remorse, biting and clawing at whatever part of the giant spider it could access.

In the commotion, Ash, Gary, and Ivy broke apart. Pidgeotto took to the sky, but it couldn't fly properly with all the Spinarak streaming down from above and its wings became entangled with webbing. The Spinarak converged on it and bit into it with their small fangs, releasing dose after dose of deadly venom. Pidgeotto squawked in pain.

"Pidgeotto!" Ash screamed.

Pikachu climbed up Ash's back and leaped into the air. It fired off a lightning bolt and hit a few Spinarak. The spiders fried and fell to the ground. Pidgeotto fell with them, and Ash ran to its side. It was

convulsing and its eyes were dilated. Poison oozed from multiple entry wounds, and its wings were covered in tangled spider webbing. Ash shook the bird.

"Hey, buddy, you're gonna be okay."

Pidgeotto shuddered once more before falling still. Its dark eyes were bright and glazed, and Ash could see his reflection in them. Tears welled in his eyes.

"Pidgeotto!"

"Ash, look out!"

A String Shot caught Ash's right arm and pinned him to the forest floor. He rolled over and tried to pry off the webbing, but it was drying fast and sticky to the touch, impossible to break. An Ariados reared up on its hind legs and charged at Ash, but Houndour and Growlithe each sprinted in from opposite sides and chomped down on two of Ariados's bladed appendages. Their bites were laced with fire, and Ariados tripped and fell. Then, out of nowhere, Ivy ran and jumped on Ariados's back and rammed her serrated hunting knife deep into the massive spider's brain. Ariados shook violently and crumpled to the ground, still.

Ash stared in horrified awe as she yanked her knife, now slick with green spider blood, free of Ariados's carcass and jumped down. She then started picking at the web binding Ash to the ground. It chipped under her knife, as hard as cement.

"Uh, Ivy?"

"A little busy."

"Behind you!"

Ivy looked over her shoulder at the two Ariados now cornering Gary, Scyther, and Nidorino. "Damnit. Ash, stay here."

She got up and ran to help Gary with Houndour and Growlithe at her heels.

"Yeah, no problem. I'll just hang out here, totally fine."

Pikachu began to spark nervously, and Ash looked up. Spinarak were descending from the canopy, and their next meal was all but waiting

for them on a silver platter. Ash swallowed.

"Oh, fuck."

Meanwhile, Gary was stuck behind Scyther and Nidorino, the latter of which was trembling with fury but suffering spider bites from its last tussle with a now dead Ariados. Gary racked his brain for a strategy, but no matter how he spun it, two Ariados were stronger than Scyther and a wounded Nidorino that was only fighting against them on instinct, not out of any sense of loyalty.

"Gary!"

Ivy skidded to a halt behind the two Ariados with Growlithe and Houndour at her heels. Growlithe barked in distress when it saw Gary cornered. The two Ariados realized they were surrounded and wasted no time in attacking. They spat twin streams of poison at each of Gary and Ivy. Gary rolled to avoid the attack, but the sleeve of his jacket got doused and began to deteriorate and smoke under the corrosive acid. He hastily pulled the jacket off and threw it away.

Ivy was faster and managed to dodge the attack, while Houndour charged at Ariados. It snapped at the spider's bladed legs. The colossal arachnid spun around and tried to stab Houndour as the canine darted in between its legs and snarled. Growlithe jumped on Ariados's back and shook as though wet. Embers fell from its orange fur and burned everything in the vicinity. Nidorino backed up from the flames, wary.

Ivy backed away from the fight. "Houndour, fry 'em up!"

Houndour mimicked Growlithe's Ember attack and began to shake out its super-heated fur, but Ariados finally aimed right and struck it with one of its bladed legs. Houndour whimpered and fell.

"Houndour!"

The other Ariados managed to shake Growlithe off its back and scuttled away from the embers, but it didn't go far. The fire attack barely scathed it through its plated armor. If anything, it had only made it madder.

Scyther took the opportunity to fly up and attack from above. Ariados fired off a sticky String Shot, but Scyther was fast and avoided it. The green mantis rammed Ariados and sank its sabre claws into the spider's abdomen. Unlike before, it forwent feasting on the spider and instead began hacking away at it. Razor-sharp scythe claws made

short work of the tough exoskeleton and shredded Ariados's innards to a gooey, green pulp.

Ivy ran to scoop up the injured Houndour, whose back leg was broken and bleeding where Ariados had stepped through it. Gary ran toward the remaining Ariados.

"Growlithe, try Flame Wheel!"

Growlithe roared and charged, fearless.

"Nidorino, use Fury Attack!"

Nidorino, perhaps more for its own purposes than out of any sense of obedience to Gary, nevertheless shook its poisoned quills and fired them at Ariados. They soared over Growlithe's back and rained down on the enormous spider. The poison wouldn't do much, but the numerous wounds were enough to throw it off-balance and piss it off even more. Growlithe took advantage of the distraction and sprinted head-on toward Ariados. Flames kicked up under its feet and grew rapidly until they surrounded the brave canine's whole body. It rammed Ariados and the fire exploded. This time, the flames caught and spread underneath the spider's armor through the puncture wounds Nidorino's Fury Attack had opened up.

Ariados screamed and lost the strength to remain standing. Slowly, it roasted from the inside out. Fumes rose through cracks in its armor and released a rancid, damp stench into the already stagnant air. It twitched, helpless, as it succumbed to a slow and torturous death.

Gary wiped his mouth, conscious of the way his heart was racing with adrenaline and fear. Ivy had recalled Houndour to its Pokéball and joined Gary.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah."

A flash of electricity caught their eye from the other side of the clearing, and Ash was shouting.

"But Ash isn't. C'mon!"

Ivy left, and only Pikachu stood in between Ash and the army of Spinarak descending on him like some kind of sick judgment. He tried

to free his arm, but the web was as hard as a rock and wouldn't budge. Only fire would disintegrate it, but he didn't have a Fire Pokémon. Pikachu was doing its best to zap any Spinarak that hovered too close using Thunderwave, but it couldn't get all of them. Some made it to the forest floor and began crawling toward Ash.

"Get away!" Ash stomped with his feet and crushed a couple spiders that wandered too close. One managed to crawl onto his trapped arm, and its fangs glistened with poison. Without concern for the risk, he grabbed it with his free hand and crushed with all his might. Spinarak popped and green blood slicked his hand and fingers. "Oh, nasty."

He looked up and the sight that greeted him was not a pleasant one. The spiders just kept coming, and Pikachu wouldn't be able to fend them all off at once.

Think, Ash! Something that'll take them all out at once. Think!

Ash wiped his slimy hand on his favorite red jacket and fumbled for a Pokéball at his belt. It tumbled free and released Ivysaur. The blue reptile lifted its snout and peered at the horde of Spinarak hovering ever closer. It released two long, sentient vines and began slapping spiders right out of the sky, tearing them in half with the force of its attacks.

"Ivysaur, that's not gonna cut it," Ash said as he shrugged off his jacket held it up against his face. "Stun Spore them, and I mean *all* of them!"

Ivysaur ambled closer to Ash and growled low and guttural. The flower on its back began to quiver and expand until a cloud of yellowish dust shot from between the petals and wafted into the air. As soon as the nearest Spinarak inhaled a whiff of the poison, they twitched erratically and fell to the ground, paralyzed. Ash breathed deeply through his jacket and closed his eyes. He flinched as he felt thump after thump of spider carcasses raining down on him, but he just held the jacket tighter around his face and prayed it would be enough to spare him the Spinarak's unpleasant fate. Ivysaur continued to shoot jets of paralytic spores into the air and walked down the length of Ash's prostrate body.

"Ash!"

"Wait, don't breathe that in!"

Gary grabbed Ivy's arms and held her back before she could run into the danger zone. It felt like longer than the two minutes it took for

Ivysaur to clear out the Spinarak. When the air was free of the paralytic, Gary and Ivy rushed to Ash's side. Pikachu lay motionless, awake but unable to move. Ivy pulled the jacket from Ash's face. He was dazed and confused.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty, wake up." She tapped his cheek to rouse him.

"Ugh... Is it dinner time yet?"

Ivy shook her head and laughed. "Idiot. All you think about is food."

"Growlithe, melt this. Carefully." Gary indicated the webbing gluing Ash to the ground.

Growlithe trotted over and began to chew at the white substance. Its teeth cut with fire and slowly ate away at the webbing until it had created a hole big enough for Ash to pull his hand free. Ash gripped his head in his hands once liberated.

"Dude, I feel like I drank my weight in vodka last night."

"That's what you get for using Stun Spore on yourself, dumbass." Gary held out a hand and helped him up.

"Whatever, you're just jealous 'cause I thought of it first."

"Please," Ivy said. "Gary's not creative enough to think of it at all, let's not kid ourselves."

Ash grinned despite looking like he might throw up at any moment. "Ah, soooo true."

Ivysaur ambled around sniffing at the paralyzed Spinarak and prodded one with its snout. It stepped on the spider's head and bit down on its back half, pulling it apart and chewing experimentally. It liked what it tasted and moved on to the next spider and repeated the process until it was sated.

"We should get outta here before the ones Ivysaur can't stomach wake up," Gary said.

"Funny, that's what I said *before* we got attacked by giant Bugs." Ivy pulled out her Pokédex and scanned one of the dead Ariados. "Huh, this thing really does know a lot." She paused before adding, "But I guess it had no idea there was a nest of these nasties all the way out here. Bet one of them got away from a trainer. Look at *that*." She

pointed to a note in the Pokédex. "They multiply faster than Rattata. Huh, maybe that's because they lay like a zillion eggs at once. The more you know."

Gary shut the Pokédex for her. "Okay, we get the picture. Savor this moment, 'cause it won't happen again."

Ivy smirked and pocketed the Pokédex. "Of *course*."

"Can we get outta here now?" Ash scooped up Pikachu.

Gary crouched down in front of Nidorino, who had calmed down now that it was weighed down with numerous injuries and stress. He held out Nidorino's Pokéball.

"Hey, Nidorino. I can help you," he said.

Nidorino grunted and pawed the ground, still wary.

"It's pretty beat up," Ivy said.

"The poison shouldn't affect it much. It's a Poison-type, after all. Actually, we're lucky it took that Sludge Bomb for us. It's basically immune, but we're not."

The remains of Gary's jacket lay crumpled in a smoking heap near the Ariados carcasses, a grim reminder that luck had saved them this day.

"That guy was his trainer," Ash said. "And the spiders got him. I bet Nidorino's pretty traumatized."

"Yeah," Gary said. "But I can't leave it here."

Nidorino was barely standing at this point. It didn't put up a fight when Gary recalled it to the Pokéball he'd pried off Nidorino's dead former trainer.

Ivy noticed Pidgeotto's maimed carcass lying several feet away. "Ash, your Pidgeotto..."

Ash's face was hidden beneath the brim of his cap. "Yeah."

The Spinarak Ivysaur had paralyzed were starting to come to, and Growlithe snarled in reaction.

"C'mon. We need to leave."

Gary led them out of the spider nest and back to the path before they could be spider food. There was no time to retrieve Pidgeotto's body. The many Spinarak slowly woke up and crept toward the bird's carcass, where they resumed their previous assault. Even with their larger relatives gone, they would not go hungry tonight.

3. Pewter City

Triumvirate, chapter 3: Pewter City
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

After three more days and two nights of trekking through the labyrinthine Viridian Forest, the trio finally emerged on the other side. Pewter City loomed to the north beyond acres of farmland where corn, wheat, and other staple crops grew. Farmers tended the vast fields guarded by Graveler, Machoke, and Fearow. With Viridian Forest so close and home to scores of feral Pokémon, they couldn't be too careful. Ivy noticed other people patrolling the fields in bulky four wheelers that looked distinctly military grade. Their drivers were not dressed for farming, but rather for security despite the more than adequate Pokémon presence already there. She frowned, suspicious, but said nothing of it to Ash and Gary.

After another couple hours of hiking past the farms, they passed through the thirty-foot stone wall surrounding Pewter City and checked in with the sentry guard. They were admitted after flashing their trainer IDs and soon found themselves wandering the cobblestone streets and arguing over the fastest way to the Pokémon Center.

"No, I swear it's to the left," Ivy said.

"You've never even been here before," Gary pointed out.

"Well, unlike you, *I* can read a map."

"Oh, really? So why's the Pokémon Center actually straight ahead that way?" Ash pointed down the street and grinned.

Gary and Ivy looked up from the map they'd buried their heads in.

"Yeah, straight ahead to the left. That's what I said." Ivy pocketed the map and skipped ahead.

"That's not what you— Goddamnit." Gary trudged after her with Ash in tow.

"What I wanna know is how she can skip with that super heavy bag she's carrying," Ash said.

They made it to the Pokémon Center and dropped off Nidorino,

Pikachu, and Houndour with the nurses for medical attention. It was larger than the Pokémon Center in Viridian and incorporated a PokéMart and small cafeteria, too. But like the Viridan Pokémon Center—and all Pokémon Centers—it sported the same carnelian-painted walls and tables, off-white tiling, and architectural layout with the guest rooms on the upper floors and the medical wing on the ground floor. The cafeteria and PokéMart were downstairs in the basement.

This time, the trio was able to rent two rooms so that Ivy was on her own while Ash and Gary were stuck in a bunk bed. Everyone was so grateful for showers and cafeteria food that wasn't in jerky form that there was hardly any arguing that night. They went to bed early, intending to visit the Gym tomorrow to see about getting support for Pallet Town.

When morning did roll around, Ivy was surprised to find Gary awake and waiting in the lobby before her.

"Letting Ash sleep again?" she ventured as she joined him at a table.

"He went to grab us food. Nurse Joy says Pikachu will be discharged today."

"What about Houndour and Nidorino?"

"They're not doing as great. It'll be another couple of days. At this rate, we'll be running out of cash sooner than I anticipated. The medical treatment's way more expensive than I remember it being."

"Happy now that I nabbed that asshat's wallet back in Viridian?"

Gary shot her a warning look. "Maybe don't announce that where people can hear you."

Ivy smiled smugly and leaned back in her chair. "You're welcome."

"Morning, guys!" Ash returned with a grocery bag containing take-out from the cafeteria downstairs.

Ivy's stomach rumbled at the smell of food. "Oh my god, are those eggs?"

"Hell yeah."

They split up the food and dug in heartily.

"This is enough food for six people," Gary said.

"Yeah, this was all they'd sell me, sorry, guys."

"'S okay," Ivy said through a mouthful of food.

"How much did this all cost you?" Gary asked.

"Oh, yeah, about that." Ash swallowed the bite he was chewing and smiled sheepishly. "I'm gonna need some more cash. They about cleaned me out with the bill."

"I gave you enough for three days' worth of food and supplies. What the hell?"

"Dunno, I guess things're just more expensive these days."

About fifteen minutes and two extra helpings for each of Ash and Ivy later, Nurse Joy emerged from the back room with Pikachu. It jumped out of her arms and scampered over to Ash.

"Hey, buddy! Looks like you're feeling better." Ash scooped up the yellow rodent and held out a piece of toast for it to nibble on.

"Pikachu's going to be just fine. Although, he had a very high dose of a paralytic agent in his bloodstream. He should take the next few days to relax a little."

"Will do."

"How about Nidorino and Houndour?" Gary asked.

Nurse Joy sighed. "Nidorino was badly poisoned and surely would have died if he wasn't a Poison-type. Still, now that we've extracted the foreign venom, he'll need some time to heal his wounds. The same goes for Houndour. Check back with me in a few days, okay?"

"Thanks."

"I'm glad Nidorino's okay," Ash said. "We saw what that spider poison could do."

Gary's expression fell. "Sorry about Pidgeotto. That really sucks."

Ash forced a smile. "Me too. He was a solid Pokémon."

They finished their breakfast and decided to head to the Gym

together.

"You guys aren't leaving me behind this time," Ash said.

"Let's just hope this Gym Leader will even be around," Gary said.

The Gym was on the other side of town. On the way, they passed boutique shops and cafes all in the same gothic architecture characteristic of Pewter City.

"Hey, Ivy," Ash said. "Are there any places in Johto that look like this?"

Ivy watched as a group of kids raced by playing tag. Their shoes clacked against the cobblestone, and their laughter echoed behind them.

"No, there's not."

Soon they had arrived at the Gym. The sun was still low in the sky, but the air was warm and dry. Beyond the gym ran a mountain chain that disappeared into the fog in the distance. Pewter Gym was an imposing structure with its tall, stone arches and gargoyles that snarled down from the columns. Unlike in Viridian, there were no signs of Team Rocket blocking the entrance.

"So, do we knock?" Ash asked.

"Why should we? It's a public building." Gary went for the knob and found the front double doors unlocked. "See?"

Ash and Ivy exchanged a look, and Ash shrugged.

Inside, the Gym was high-ceilinged and vast. There were many rooms for offices and sleeping quarters. Pokémon trainers would congregate here to train with the Leader, but only if he accepted them. It was rumored to be a difficult life training under a Gym Leader, but those were among the strongest trainers around. The main part of the Gym was a wide space with an open roof. The floor was simply the ground. Boulders and piles of dirt and rubble dotted the space. To the left were punching bags, weights, and other typical workout equipment for people. On the right-hand side of the Gym near the bleachers, two Geodude were whaling on each other as a group of four people looked on.

"Excuse us," Gary said as they approached the group. "Which one of

you is the Gym Leader in charge?"

The four trainers looked up, and Ivy was surprised to see that they all closely resembled each other. They all had dark skin and darker, curly hair. Their jawlines were square-cut and set, and they had an aura of toughness about them that was almost palpable, like they were used to hardship and had grown strong because of it.

"Who's askin'?" A young girl no older than twelve or thirteen stepped forward. One of the Geodude rolled to her side and planted its fists in the ground.

"I'm Gary Oak of Pallet Town, and I have urgent business with the Gym Leader."

"Oak, as in the famous professor?" said one of the young men.

"My grandfather."

"So what would a professor want with the Pewter Gym? And why not come himself?"

Ash stepped forward before Gary could answer. "I'm Ash Ketchum of Pallet Town, and we're here because we got attacked by rampaging Snorlax over a week ago. We need you to send medical supplies and people to Pallet to help out the people who got hurt in the attack."

The guy put up his hands and stepped away from the group. Judging from his height and build, he looked to be the oldest of the bunch. "Whoa, hold up there. Snorlax? They don't usually come down from the mountains."

"Yeah, but when they do they like to make an impression," Ivy snapped.

The guy noticed her and held out his hand. "Hey, I didn't catch your name."

Ivy's arms were crossed and she wasn't liking the grin he'd adopted just now. "I didn't give it."

The guy wasn't fazed. "They call me Brock the Rock, but you can just call me Brock. And it just so happens I'm the Gym Leader around these parts. These are some of my younger siblings, Forrest, Salvadore, and Yolanda. So, are you also from Pallet Town and in need of help? Miss...?"

Ivy was about to tell him just where he could shove his rock when Ash stepped in between Brock and Ivy. "Ivy! This is Ivy. And, uh, she's also *really* interested in getting help for our friends and family."

"Ivy, I like that. It's like a flower, beautiful and delicate."

"It's a ground-creeping leaf, you fatuous son of a—"

"Ahahahaha!" Ash laughed loudly to drown out whatever Ivy's expletive of the day might be. "You got that right, Brock!"

Gary sighed. "Listen, Brock, the point is we really need your help, and fast."

Brock regarded Gary. "I get what you're saying, man, and I'm sorry to hear about those Snorlax. That's a really shitty break. But the fact is Pallet's not in my jurisdiction. You want to be in Viridian."

"We just came from there, and the Gym Leader's out of town until the end of the month. We don't have that kind of time."

"Like I said, I'm really sorry, but I can't do anything."

Ash got in his face and grabbed the collar of his shirt. "What do you mean you can't? You got the supplies, the people, and the authority to send them all south. It's not that you can't, it's that you won't."

Brock frowned and removed Ash's hands from him by the wrist. "Call it what you want, but the fact is I can't step on Viridian's toes. That's not how things work."

"So what, you're just gonna condemn all those innocent people to their fates? To death? You can't do that!"

Brock frosted over and glared at Ash. "It's not my fault what happened in Pallet, and it's not my responsibility. I have a duty to Pewter, and I'm not about to divert precious resources to a town that's not even in our territorial jurisdiction."

"That's not good enough!"

Ivy put a hand on Ash's shoulder and squeezed. Hard. "Okay, I think we're about done here. Gary?"

Gary nodded to Brock and took Ash's arm. Together, he and Ivy led Ash back outside.

"What the hell, guys? We can't just leave empty-handed!"

Gary let him go once Ivy closed the double doors behind them. "And what do you suggest, huh? It's not like we can force Brock to help us. He's a Gym Leader, and unfortunately, he's right about the jurisdictional issue."

"So you're totally okay leaving our friends and family back home to suffer? Maybe even die? My mom's in a fucking coma in case you forgot."

"I didn't forget, don't you dare even think that." Gary ran a hand through his hair and started to pace. "I know we have a responsibility to Pallet Town, but we're gonna have to find another way to help."

"God, we'd never even be in this mess if you guys hadn't pissed off Team Rocket in Viridian. I mean, at least those guys have men and a shit ton of money. I can't believe Ivy had to go and steal from them and make us run like a bunch of fugitives."

Ivy looked between the two of them, but she couldn't summon words for them. All she had was a growing lump in her throat that made it hard to swallow. And the worst part was that they were right.

She took off at a run without warning, not toward the Pokémon Center but away, just away. They called after her, but she didn't turn back. No use in letting them see the tears that threatened to spill.

The rest of the day, Ivy was nowhere to be found. Ash had immediately regretted his outburst after she ran off, but the damage was done. He resolved himself to looking for her around town with Pikachu, but Gary felt no such obligation. With no viable options regarding aid to Pallet Town and Ash flying off the radar in search of Ivy, leaving Pewter wasn't possible. So Gary did what he'd always done when he didn't know what else to do: he went for a walk.

He'd skipped lunch, appetite nonexistent, and walked with his hands in his pockets. His mind wandered to Nidorino, who was still recovering at the Pokémon Center. Houndour was there, too. But the thought of the black canine made him think about Ivy, and his sour mood was back. The hand-crafted cobblestone streets and authentic, gothic architecture all around him were magnificent, but they weren't doing enough to clear his mind. On a whim, he released Eevee from its Pokéball. Eevee was happy to be walking around and ran ahead to sniff at anything it could reach on its stubby legs.

"What am I supposed to do, Gramps?" Gary said aloud. "Tell me what I'm supposed to do."

There was no answer, of course. He wondered what Professor Oak could be doing now, if he'd reached Hoenn and was on the way to figuring out what had caused the Snorlax to invade Pallet Town.

A sweet smell, like rotting fruit and meat, wafted upon the breeze and Gary wrinkled his nose. On the corner up ahead, there were bulging trash bags piled on top of each other about eight feet high and taking up the entire corner. People covered their noses as they hurried past. Eevee sneezed when it got too close and darted ahead to get away from the rancid smell. Frowning, Gary passed the trash pile and peered down the street to his right. On every corner, trash bags were similarly stacked and awaiting retrieval. But it was the middle of the day on a Thursday, and trash collectors usually came on weekend mornings. Either the municipal waste collection agency was on strike, or someone was choosing to let all this trash pile up. He remembered the conversation he'd had with Ivy in Viridian about Team Rocket getting into the trash business in various cities around the continent, wondering.

Eevee mewled up ahead, and Gary abandoned the thought to catch up with the small feline. Eevee was sitting in front of a large building and watching Gary expectantly. Gary approached, and Eevee rubbed up against his pant leg. The sign on the building read, 'Pewter Museum of Science'.

"You want to go in here?"

Eevee just looked up at him with its large, dark eyes. Gary sighed and reached down to pick it up.

"What the hell. It's not like I got anywhere else to be right now."

With Eevee in his arms, Gary entered the museum and paid the entrance fee. The interior was two stories of all kinds of exhibits, mostly Pokémon-themed. There were interactive stations where kids could match Pokémon skeletons to their skins, and sculpted recreations of ancient Pokémon. Gary stopped to look at an exhibit depicting an artist's rendition of a raging sea where whirlpools rose off the surface and descended on islands full of people.

"Lugia's Will," he read aloud on the placard.

"I see you're interested in the tales of ancient Pokémon."

An old man drew up beside him and examined the painting. He wore a fedora over slicked, white hair and a matching brown suit. His gold name tag read, 'Byron Stone, Curator'.

"Not particularly, but it's a nice painting. You're the curator?"

"It is a nice painting, and yes, I'm the curator as of three years ago. I recently relocated here from Rustboro City in Hoenn."

Gary nodded. "Well, excuse me."

"Do you know the story?"

"Story?"

"Behind the painting."

Gary looked over the painting again, thinking. "Lugia's an ancient Pokémon. A myth. I don't really know much beyond that."

"Ah, yes, it is considered a myth, just as are most things people today haven't seen with their own eyes. But that doesn't mean there was never a time when it wasn't merely a myth. This painting," he pointed to the display through the glass, "is proof of that."

"No offense, Mr. Stone, but a painting doesn't really prove anything."

Mr. Stone laughed. "Young people today are so skeptical. But I can't blame you. I will say, though, that Lugia is as real as you and me and so are the three elemental guardians that exist to keep its power locked away."

Mr. Stone beckoned Gary to follow him to the second floor. There were fewer patrons here, but the exhibits consisted of more skeletons, fossils, and another painting, the latter of which Mr. Stone stopped in front of. It depicted a violent storm over a black ocean. Lightning, fire, and ice bolts collided against frothing waves, and like the previous painting, an island sat in the middle of the destruction and chaos, drowning.

"Articuno, Zapdos, and Moltres were thought to be physical incarnations of the three mystical elements of life—ice, lightning, and fire, respectively. Fire supports life, ice takes it away, and lightning revitalizes it after death. Together, they form a triumvirate of annihilation strong enough to sink mountains and freeze oceans."

Mr. Stone moved to the next exhibit, which depicted a yellowed piece of parchment crumbling at the edges. The writing on it was faded and illegible in a language Gary didn't recognize. "The ancients recorded their battle against Lugia when it rose from the depths of the ocean to drown the world with its sorrow. As you can see from the way we're standing here now, they were successful."

"That's a nice bedtime story, but I've outgrown fairy tales and impossible legends."

Mr. Stone nodded. "It's all right, I understand. But I hope you'll consider this—there's no such thing as an impossible legend. To become legendary, there must necessarily be possibility, and that possibility is what inspires storytellers to keep the legend alive."

"Mr. Stone?" The receptionist from the front desk who'd accepted Gary's entrance fee was standing near the stairwell. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but your grandson is on the phone for you. He said it's urgent."

"Ah, thank you. I'll be right down. It was nice to meet you."

Gary took the offered hand and shook it. "Gary Oak. Sorry for taking up so much for your time."

Mr. Stone smiled knowingly. "Not at all." He turned to leave and waved back. "Please give your grandfather all my best."

Gary watched him go and Eevee butted his chest with its nose playfully. He scratched its head absentmindedly. "I guess I shoulda seen that one coming."

He turned back to the rest of the exhibits. There were fossils of ancient Pokémon and even recovered skeletons reconstructed and standing up. Kabutops reminded him of Scyther with its bladed appendages except for the fact that it was nearly twice Scyther's height. The most impressive exhibit was the Aerodactyl skull. Eevee sniffed at the glass that divided them, curious. The skull was massive, as big as a Dragonite skull, at least.

"Legends, huh?" Gary let his eyes linger on the skull. "I'll believe them when I see them."

His stomach rumbled, and he checked his watch. It was already past seven in the evening, and he hadn't eaten since breakfast.

"Let's go see if Ash is back."

He left the museum and headed back to the Pokémon Center with Eevee in tow.

Ash was back, but Ivy wasn't. The boys ended up having a silent dinner together as neither felt inclined to talk about what had transpired earlier that day. But as usual, Ash found a reason to fill the empty space between them.

"You never said what you thought about Munchlax."

"What does it matter? You're gonna do what you want either way."

"Yeah, but I need you to understand why I'm doing it."

"No, you *want* me to understand."

Ash crossed his arms. "Now you sound like her."

The reminder of Ivy's absence was not a welcome one. "Look, Ash, bottom line is Munchlax may be harmless now, but it won't be forever. And you can't sit there and guarantee that you'll be able to handle it."

"Whatever. I'll show you I can. I'll prove it to you."

He released Munchlax from its Pokéball and handed it a plate with the rest of their uneaten food. Ash had ordered too much, thinking Ivy would show up. Munchlax was more than happy to partake of her share, and it plopped down on its haunches and dug in.

"In any case, that's not gonna be enough to sustain Munchlax. You're better off setting it loose for a couple hours so it can eat and pass out for a week."

"Sure. Once Ivy's back, we'll find somewhere to take Munchlax. Sound good, little guy?" He ruffled Munchlax's fur, but it was too busy eating to care. Pikachu nibbled at the food it dropped in its hurry to fill its growing belly.

Gary got up and dumped his paper utensils in the trash. "I'm going to bed."

"Dude, don't be like that."

"When're you gonna get it through your head that's she's probably

gone? And honestly? I'm glad. She was trouble from the minute she showed up in Pallet Town, and you know it."

Ash stood up and walked across the room. "What I said earlier today? I was mad. And yeah, maybe it's her fault that Team Rocket's pissed at us. But it's not her fault the Viridian Gym Leader was gone. Yeah, she's hiding something, but last time I checked, friends trust in each other. Professor Oak trusted her. And you know what? I trust her, too. I just hope I didn't push her away 'cause I said some dumb shit when I was angry."

Gary shrugged off his jacket and threw it on the bed. "I'm done talking about this. I just wanna go to sleep and worry about what we're gonna do about getting help for Pallet Town tomorrow. If we can't find it here, then we'll go somewhere else. Either way, that has to be our priority, not worrying about some girl who's only ever lied to us about literally everything."

He showed Ash his back and disappeared into the bathroom. Ash sighed and leaned a hand on the table where the rest of his food was getting cold.

"Why can't I get through to anyone I care about?"

Pikachu squeaked and looked up at him from the floor. Munchlax had finished eating and also looked up at Ash with its curious, sad look. With no other choice, he got ready for bed, too, and hoped tomorrow things would be different.

The only thing worse than reverting to old ways was how easy and natural it felt, like she was born for this life and there would never be anything beyond it. After running off, Ivy stuck to the residential area of the city and took to the roofs. She spotted Ash looking for her in the streets, but she remained hidden. She considered visiting Houndour at the Pokémon Center but decided against it. It would still be a few days before Houndour was well enough to travel, anyway.

When night fell, she scouted out houses and apartments that remained dark. Empty. Once she'd settled on a target, breaking in was child's play. The fridge was bare, but the cabinets were stocked with non-perishables, so dinner was only a ten-minute wait and a stovetop away. Once she'd eaten, showered, and picked a bedroom to crash in for the night, she crawled into bed and let Umbreon out. Her pack sat at the foot of the bed, and she opened it up to look for pajamas.

Something large and heavy rolled out onto the bed as she searched, and she gave the oblong object a once-over. Umbreon sniffed it, curious about the rough, scaly shell protecting it.

Ivy paused her search for sleepwear and put a hand over the heavy object. Under her fingertips, she could feel something moving around inside.

"Looks like it'll hatch soon."

The egg, which was larger than her head, rocked slightly on its own. Umbreon, having lost interest in it, stretched out and curled up in Ivy's lap as she pulled on a sleeping shirt, purring. Ivy repacked her bag, including the weighty egg, and carefully set it down on the floor. Lying back in bed, her mind wandered to the quagmire in which she presently found herself.

A part of her knew this had all been a mistake from the beginning, that joining forces with Ash and Gary would do more harm than good. When she'd started this mission, she knew she was going it alone. That's what they had agreed upon. If she closed her eyes, she could see his face in those last moments they were together.

"*The next time we see each other, it'll be to put an end to this once and for all,"* he'd promised her.

Umbreon opened its yellow eyes and stared up at her, as though it knew what she was thinking.

"I'm still gonna keep our promise, but there's something else I have to do first." She scratched Umbreon's long ear, thoughtful. "What do you say, girl? Up for some action?"

Umbreon just curled back up and went to sleep. She smiled.

"Yeah, we're gonna need a good night's sleep for tomorrow."

Ivy switched off the lamp and got under the covers. Tomorrow would be a very busy day.

When Brock woke up this morning, he'd been expecting to have a pleasant morning having breakfast with his siblings and getting in some training at the Gym. He hadn't expected to see the cute girl with a bad attitude demanding he fight her before he'd had his coffee.

"Brick!" she shouted as she burst through the double doors. "Where are you?"

"Uh, Bro?" Forrest said through a bite of breakfast. "I think she's talkin' to you."

Brock rubbed his eyes and reluctantly got up from the table to see what the commotion was. Ivy was in the main Gym area waiting for him.

"Hey there," he greeted her. "By the way, it's Brock, not Brick. But if you're here for a date, then you can call me whatever you want."

"I'm not here on a social call. You're gonna send help to Pallet Town, jurisdiction or not."

"This again? Look, I explained everything yesterday and my position hasn't changed."

"I'm here to change it for you."

Brock chuckled and walked closer, but she didn't back down. "Oh, yeah? And how're you gonna do that?"

"Ivy!" Ash jogged into the Gym with Gary and Pikachu in tow. "What're you doing here? I was looking everywhere for you yesterday."

"I'm in the middle of something, Ash."

"Oh, I think we're done here." Brock reached for her arm, but Ivy shot out a hand and twisted his wrist back. He swore in pain.

"We're not even close to done."

Ash gaped. "Whoa, did you know she could do that? I did *not* know she could do that."

"What exactly is going on here?" Gary asked as he eyed Ivy's grip on Brock with no small degree of suspicion.

"If you won't listen to words, then you'll listen to physical force," Ivy said. "I challenge you to a Pokémon battle. If I win, you send help to Pallet Town and you owe me a favor of my choosing."

Brock didn't struggle in her grip, but he also didn't show any signs of discomfort. After a moment, Ivy relented and released him. "That's a

mean grip you've got there. But it's not gonna change the fact that Gyms exist to protect the city, not to entertain hotshot trainers lookin' for a beating."

"If I'm just looking for a beating, then I guess you've got nothing to lose."

"Ivy." Gary drew up next to her. "Cut it out. You can't challenge a Gym Leader, that's not how things work. He could have you arrested if he wanted."

She glared up at him. "Then it's a good thing I'm the one being reckless here and not you." To Brock she said, "The jurisdictional issue isn't why you're so reluctant to send help to Pallet Town. You mentioned not wanting to divert precious resources away from Pewter before, but on our way here through Viridian Forest, we bypassed hundreds of acres of farmland. You'd think that with that much arable land producing crops, resources would be in abundance."

Brock narrowed his eyes. "It's not that simple."

"Actually, it's very simple. Your problem is that Pewter doesn't own that land anymore, Team Rocket does. I noticed a bunch of people in armored four wheelers patrolling some of the farmland outside the city, but why the extra protection against Viridian Forest when sentry Pokémon're more than enough to cover that? They were keeping people out, not Pokémon.

"And last night, I noticed that a ton of houses and apartment buildings went dark, like no one was living there. Strange, for a city as big as Pewter. It's because Team Rocket's not just interested in hoarding farmland, but also real estate in cities all over Kanto. And now, you've got skyrocketing crop prices, rents, and private tax collectors for municipal services like garbage collection that Pewter citizens can't keep up with. It's not that you lack resources; it's that you've handed over control of those resources to a shady group of people."

Brock was silent for a moment, and Forrest gave him a concerned look. "Bro, is that true? Is that why everyone's been asking for help?"

"How do you know about that?" Brock asked softly. "I've been doing everything I can to work with the local government and offer crop and rent subsidies from the Gym's private revenue."

"Because Team Rocket's been doing the exact same thing in Johto for the past five years. Now they're replicating the system in Kanto. Your

situation's not unique, I've seen it before even in wealthy metropolises like Goldenrod. It starts with things like jacked up rent, but the burden trickles down to other services, even health and medical. Your Pokémon Center's prices here are pretty exorbitant for non-invasive procedures, and they're just gonna get worse. It's only a matter of time before Team Rocket owns you and your elected officials, and then you'll be answering to new bosses."

"So, what? None of this changes the fact that we don't have the capacity to send help to Pallet."

"Then you'll have to make capacity. That is, if I beat you in a Pokémon battle."

Gary was silent as he processed what Ivy was saying. Ash, however, had no such reservations.

"Are you insane? Brock's a Gym Leader, the best trainer this side of Mt. Moon."

"Oh, and you just happen to know every trainer this side of Mt. Moon? Please. What do you say, Brock? Think you can handle me out there? If Ash's right about you, this should be a piece of cake for you."

"Bro, if Dad finds out you were using the Gym to fight, we could get in a lot of trouble," Forrest said.

"Let me worry about Dad. I'm the Gym Leader, not him."

Brock deliberated silently a moment, and Ivy balanced on the balls of her feet, waiting. If she was right about him, if she'd read him right, then he would bite. He had to bite. She forced herself not to look at Ash and Gary, whose eyes were heavy on her back.

C'mon, Brock. Defend your ego. C'mon.

Finally, Brock rubbed his stubbled chin and smirked. "Okay, I accept your challenge. And I'll even agree to your terms because I'm a gentleman. But when I win, you guys gotta give up on getting my help for Pallet Town. Oh, and I wanna take you to dinner, just you and me."

Ivy had to keep herself from grinning. *Men.* She held out a hand. "Deal."

Brock shook her hand. "Deal. Two on two work for you?"

"That's perfect."

"Forrest, get the arena ready."

Brock and Forrest stalked off to prepare the Gym for a battle. Forrest extended the bleachers so those not battling could watch. Brock's other siblings huddled together in the bleachers, eager to watch their brother fight.

"You don't have to do this," Gary said when the three of them were alone.

"Yes, I do," Ivy said. "Don't mistake me, I've got my own reasons, too."

"I can't wait to hear them when this is all over."

She pursed her lips together and said nothing.

"Hey," Ash said. "Look, I just wanna say I'm really sorry about what I said yesterday. I was totally outta line, and I hope you can forgive me. Even though it's crazy to challenge a Gym Leader, I'll be rooting for you. Thanks for trying."

Ivy shook her head. "No, you were right about everything. This *is* all my fault. But I'm gonna fix it, I promise."

"Ready?" Brock called.

Ash, Gary, and Pikachu went to take seats in the bleachers while Ivy joined Brock on the arena. He cracked his knuckles, and she rolled her eyes.

"Is that supposed to scare me?"

"I'm starting to think there aren't a lot of things that can scare you. But we'll see if I can change that."

Brock selected a Pokéball from his belt and threw it. A hulking Golem emerged from the flash of light. Its skin was armored with stone scales harder than granite, and its head and limbs were weathered flesh too thick for a knife to pierce. It was up to Brock's chest in height, and its beady, red eyes squinted to see Ivy across the arena. Her gaze lingered on Golem for a moment, contemplative, before she reached for her own Pokéball and threw it.

Umbreon emerged and stretched languidly. Next to Golem, it was a mouse trying to climb a mountain. But neither Umbreon nor Ivy

seemed to mind the physical juxtaposition decidedly not in their favor.

Brock laughed. "Well, I did say I'd give you a fair fight. But don't get upset when your Umbreon's nothing but a tire streak on the floor once Golem's through with it."

"Is that your ego showing? Or are you just excited to see me in action?"

"Haha, okay. Golem, run 'em over with Earthquake!"

Golem threw back its head in a roar and charged. It got off to a slow start, but once it got going it ran with the force of a wrecking ball. It punched the ground and the earth split open. Rock spires were forced up from underground and raced toward Umbreon. But Umbreon jumped and dodged easily. It was small, but it was fast.

"Take a lap, Umbreon!"

Umbreon picked up speed and ran up and down the arena. Golem tried to follow with its eyes, and when Umbreon finally skidded to a halt, Golem smacked the ground again and attacked with another Earthquake. Once again, Umbreon avoided the attack.

"You'll never beat us at a distance," Brock taunted. "And I just need one hit."

From the bleachers, Brock's siblings cheered on their brother while Ash was on his feet yelling for Ivy to let Brock have it. Gary leaned on his knees and watched the battle unfold in silence.

"Brock's right," he said. "She needs to get closer. But if she does..."

And she did. "Bring it in!"

Umbreon ran directly at Golem and did its best to dodge the rock attacks Golem sent at it, but there were too many. A blunt rock column burst from the ground and hit it in the belly, sending it off course and flying through the air.

"Crush it!" Brock commanded.

Golem reached up with its leathery hands, ready to catch and smash.

"Aim for the back of the head!" Ivy said.

Umbreon twisted in midair and brought its bushy tail around in an arc. The black and yellow fur covering its body hardened to steely points as it fell right on top of Golem. When they collided, the sound of metal cracking stone was enough to rupture eardrums. Umbreon's Iron Tail attack hit Golem just behind its head and cracked its armored hide, sending it staggering to the ground in pain.

"Oh *shit*!" Ash said, smiling like an idiot.

"Oh shit." Gary stood up and leaned over the railing, shocked.

"Oh shit." Brock gritted his teeth.

Umbreon fell to the ground in a heap and struggled to stand, but the Earthquake attack it had taken earlier was taking its toll. Golem collapsed and didn't get up.

"It's a double K-O!" Forrest announced. "This round is a draw!"

Brock recalled Golem and Ivy recalled Umbreon.

"Okay, I admit I underestimated you. Golem's one of my oldest Pokémon, so I'm impressed you were able to beat it. How did you know where to strike?"

"Let's just say I never make the same mistake twice."

"Fine. But I've got one left."

Brock threw his second Pokéball and the arena shook. From amidst the Pokéball's flash, a colossal Onix reared up to its full height and roared. Ivy covered her ears to blot out the sound, but it was futile. From nose to tail, Onix was almost as tall as the roof of the Gym. It made sense now why the roof was open air. Onix's body was armored with shale and obsidian, and this one had veins of amethyst and diamond coursing along its belly, a sign of age and tested power.

"Yeah, Onix!" Yolanda cheered.

Ivy threw her second Pokéball and released Golbat. Since the last time Gary had seen it, Golbat appeared to be back to full health. Its bandages were gone, and Ivy had even fitted a black eye patch over its hollow eye socket. Its gaping maw hung open and dripped saliva as it glared up at Onix towering over it.

"Ooh, hate to break it to you, honey," Brock said, "but Onix has a type

advantage over your Golbat."

"We'll see. Batty, get up there!"

Golbat sloughed its tongue over its serrated teeth and stretched its wings. They were as long across as a full-grown man and deep violet in color. It took a moment to test them, and then it launched itself into the air with its short feet. With each flap, it kicked up a cloud of dust and debris as it rose.

"All right, then. Onix, smack it down with Stone Edge!"

Onix roared and swung its armored tail around.

"Look out!"

Golbat swooped through the air and narrowly avoided the swat. Onix didn't let up, though, and it was surprisingly fast. Very fast. It jabbed with its horned head and almost grazed Golbat if not for a last minute barrel roll. Onix crashed into the floor of the arena and caused a seismic tremor, but its tail had a mind of its own and went flying after Golbat.

"You can't outrun Onix like you did Golem. There's only so far Golbat can go!"

From the mouthful of earth Onix had swallowed, it belched out a thick cloud of sand and dust and kicked up the debris into a vortex. The Sandstorm gyrated around the arena and soon hid both Onyx and Golbat from view. Ivy shielded her eyes and stepped back.

"Damnit," Gary swore. "That Sandstorm's bad news for Flyers."

"It won't be able to see anything!" Ash said.

Gary frowned and stood up. "Or wait, not necessarily—"

"Onix, finish this!" Brock said.

Shadows converged within the roiling Sandstorm. Onix's tail pounded and smashed into boulders and mountains of packed earth as it tried to hit Golbat. No one could see what was going on within the storm, but Golbat hadn't fallen yet.

"What's taking so long?" Brock said.

Ivy shielded her eyes with her arm and squinted through the whipping

sand. "Steady, Batty!"

Onix's armored tail split the sand and smashed the ground.

"There!" Yolanda pointed toward the sky.

Golbat had breached the storm and now hovered in the open air above. It bore lacerations from the sand and debris swirling at deadly speeds below, but it was still in good shape.

"Above you, Onix!" Brock shouted.

Onix opened its massive maw and roared as it shot up through the Sandstorm toward Golbat.

"Send it spinning!"

Golbat opened its mouth in a silent scream no human ear could hear. But Onix heard it. The air around Golbat's mouth rippled with sonic waves as the Supersonic attack slammed into Onix at close range. The great rock snake jerked erratically and fell from the sky, and the Sandstorm dissipated.

Brock gasped. "Onix!"

The rock snake writhed on the ground, disoriented, and slammed its head into the earth over and over, injuring itself. Above, Golbat maintained its altitude and dripped thick drool from its open mouth.

"I think we both know this battle's over," Ivy said. "At this rate, Onix will just knock itself out or worse, tear down this whole Gym doing it."

Forrest looked toward his brother for instruction. Brock clenched his fists in anger.

"...Fine. I forfeit the round."

Forrest sighed waved a red flag in Ivy's direction. "Onix is rendered incapacitated. Golbat wins."

"Hell yeah!" Ash cheered. "Oh my god, I can't believe she did it!"

Gary was already moving through the bleachers to get down to the main arena. Golbat swooped down to the ground and crawled on all fours toward Ivy. She gently patted its head.

"Good job, Batty! You were awesome! I'll get you patched up, okay?"

Golbat's tongue lolled over its teeth and dripped drool onto the arena floor. It pressed its hairy head into Ivy's palm, and its lone eye drooped lazily. She smiled and recalled Golbat to its Pokéball and walked across the arena toward Brock. Ash and Gary jogged to join them.

"This...isn't how I imagined this going at all," Brock admitted. "I haven't lost a Pokémon battle in I don't even know how long."

"Brock," Gary said. "A deal's a deal. Pallet Town needs those supplies and medical help."

"Yeah, I know. I'm a man of my word. I don't know how, but I'll scrounge up the resources even if I have to pay for everything myself. Look, it's not like I wanted to refuse you guys help. I just didn't see any other option."

"About that," Ivy said. "I told you I wanted a favor, but I think you'll be happy to deliver since it'll ultimately get rid of your resources problem."

"Hah, right, and how d'you figure that?"

"Because the favor I want is your promise to stand up to Team Rocket."

"Stand up to Team Rocket? You're joking. They're huge, and they're everywhere. I barely have the resources to send aid to an outlying village."

"Ivy, what're you talking about?" Ash said.

She looked between Gary and Ash. "You wanted to know what I'm doing in Kanto? This is it." She turned back to Brock. "I need your and the other Gym Leaders' support to dismantle Team Rocket's operation in Kanto. If you all agree to fight back, even the Elite Four won't be able to ignore the problem any longer."

Brock shook his head. "That's...quite the favor. Wow, okay, I need to sit down."

"I know it seems impossible, but it's not. As we speak, I have a friend in Johto rallying the Johtoan Gym Leaders, too. Team Rocket's reach is enormous. To disable their influence, we have to attack them on the

ground level, starting with that farmland outside your city that rightfully belongs to the citizens of Pewter."

"You're asking me to start a war," Brock shot back.

"Not on your own, and not now. I just want proof of your support for when the time comes. You have to act on the Elite Four's authority right?"

"Yeah, but—"

"So give me a reason to convince them. If that's what it'll take to get your buy-in, then let me do the hard work and get the other Gym Leaders on board. All I'm asking for is your vote of confidence. And if it doesn't work out, and I get killed? Then you'll have nothing else to worry about. It'll be like none of this ever happened. It's a win-win for you, don't you see? Please, Brock."

"You know, you're either batshit crazy...or you're the first person I've met who's brave enough to speak out against Team Rocket. I never trusted them, and once they put the squeeze on my city, I knew I'd failed. The Mayor just handed everything to them when they promised him a nice retirement. I was too late and too cautious to get involved. I'm ashamed to say it, but I'm in a hole I can't crawl out of. Guess that was their plan all along. This isn't something I can fix with brute strength, and I can't do it alone." He shook his head and laughed sardonically. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I want to believe you. I've been sitting on my ass here for months not knowing how to deal with all this. Maybe... Hell, I dunno. Maybe you guys can do something."

"I can. It'll take time, but I can. I just need your support."

Brock fumbled with a pin on his vest and handed it to her. "Take this. It's the Boulder Badge. It's not much, but it's proof of my status as a Gym Leader ordained by the Elite Four. Maybe if you show that to the other Gym Leaders, they'll be more inclined to help you. If you can get them to agree, I'll help you move against Team Rocket. Just name the time and place."

Ivy accepted the Badge and pinned it on her jacket. "Thank you."

"Hey, if you can get rid of Team Rocket, then it'll be me thanking you."

"So you're really gonna send help to Pallet Town?" Ash asked.

Brock grinned. "Well, if I don't, Ivy's gonna sick her Golbat on me."

"We'll meet again soon," Ivy said.

"Hey, wait, if you're not leaving town right away, I'd still love to take you to dinner."

She smirked. "Thanks, but no thanks. I've got enough male company as it is to keep the headaches consistent."

Ash frowned. "Hey, now."

"Ivy, Ash," Gary said. "A word."

They bid Brock goodbye after he assured them he would be sending an envoy to Pallet Town by air within the hour. Gary didn't stop when they got outside, though, and kept walking toward the Pokémon Center. No one spoke on the way there.

Ivy walked on autopilot, knowing what was coming as soon as they were safely inside. It was inevitable, of course, but it was all happening so fast and she realized she hadn't mentally prepared herself for what could happen as a result. Before she knew it, they were back at the Pokémon Center and speaking with Nurse Joy about Ivy's injured Pokémon. After leaving Golbat and Umbreon with her for medical attention, they headed upstairs to the room Ash and Gary were staying in.

Ash sat at the table and Gary remained standing by the window. Ivy sighed and sat down on the bottom bunk.

"So," Ash said.

"I didn't want you guys to find out this way," Ivy said. "I just... I didn't wanna forfeit any chance of getting help for Pallet Town."

Gary leaned on the window sill and looked out over Pewter. "Start at the beginning."

Ivy crossed her legs on the bed and stared at her hands. "You know what happened when I got to Pallet Town."

"No. I mean the real beginning. And don't leave anything out. No more lies, no more secrets."

"You don't understand. If I tell you everything, you'll be involved. You won't be able to escape it, and you'll become a target. I know you

don't like me, Gary, but I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy."

"Hey, calm down," Ash said. "We're not going anywhere."

"*That* remains to be seen," Gary said.

Ivy hugged her knees to her chest. "Then it looks like you leave me no choice, but remember that I warned you. What I'm about to tell you is something only two other people in the whole world know. And they're, well... They're both far away." She took a deep breath. "The reason I know so much about Team Rocket... I used to be one of them." She looked up at Gary. "And Chimera? It's the reason I want to destroy them until there's not even a single one of them left breathing."

4. Origins

Triumvirate, chapter 4: Origins
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon
Note: This is a **BACKGROUND CHAPTER** detailing **Ivy's (Green's)** past with **Marco (Silver)** and **Lily (Yellow)**. As such, it occurs before and up to the events of Chapter 1.

For as long as Ivy could remember, she'd been on her guard. There was always someone or something ready to jump out of the shadows and cut her while she was down. Ever since golden wings and sharp talons had carried her off from a place she no longer remembered calling home and brought her to the Masked Man, every day had been an exercise in watching her back because the only people watching it for her would sooner stab her than protect her.

He'd called it training. If she couldn't protect herself, she had no business breathing and taking up space in the world. Nothing was free. She would always remember the first month in his care, though she used the word 'care' ironically. Total isolation and almost perpetual darkness didn't qualify as 'care'.

She remembered that he liked to watch her through his peephole. She would scream for her parents, throw tantrums, and he would only ever watch with those cold, blue eyes, almost white, they were so clear and pale. He brought with him a chill that misted her breath. But when she realized no one was coming, no one could hear, she screamed less and cried more. Until there was nothing left to cry. Those days she would sit in the corner of her six by eight foot cell with her knees to her chest and stare at nothing. Listless. Defeated. Six-year-olds are not supposed to contemplate death and dying, but in the dark where no one could see her but the man with the bright eyes that sucked all the light out of the room, her mind wandered.

Just before it could wander too far, though, he opened the door and told her to change out of her soiled clothing and put on a green smock and matching mask to conceal her visage.

"Your name is Green now."

It was the only name she would know for the next five years.

He began her training along with another's. The boy was about her age with ratty, auburn hair and piercing, grey eyes that would have

looked kind of pretty if they weren't bloodshot and ringed with purple splotches. She wondered if she looked any different, but decided she didn't want to know.

"This is Silver."

It was all the introduction they got, and it was all they needed. Like Green, Silver wore a mask and matching grey smock, and both were forbidden from removing their masks under any circumstances except to bathe. Silver was a quiet boy, but not shy. He watched and he remembered, like a caged jungle cat that sleeps with one eye open, waiting for the zoo keeper to forget to lock the door, to wander just a little too close. Over the years, the Masked Man pitted Green and Silver against each other. They began with their fists, then graduated to switchblades. Their bodies grew and their skin stretched, but the scars they accumulated connected them, like they weren't wounds at all but the only things holding them together lest they fall to pieces.

One day, Green woke up before him and hovered over his bedside. She'd never seen his real face, nor he hers. The Masked Man wouldn't come for them for another half hour, and the sun wasn't even up yet. So she carefully dipped her fingers under the bottom of his mask and lifted it over his head. Silver was instantly awake and tried to tackle her to the ground, where they rolled around. He pinned her easily, since she didn't attempt to fight back, and she stared. His forehead was creased with surprise and the instinct to fight, and his teeth were bared as he panted with the effects of adrenaline and fading dregs of sleep. He had a splash of light freckles over his nose that she'd never seen before when he wore his mask, and they dusted his rather angular cheekbones.

"My mask." He realized what she'd done and quickly got off of her to go look for it.

"Wait!"

Green got up and stood between Silver and his discarded mask. They faced off, tense, and he stole a glance at the door where any minute, the Masked Man could walk in unannounced or peek in through the peephole. He was quick to dole out beatings for disobedience, and there was no telling what he would do if he caught Silver without his mask.

Green swallowed and stepped toward him. He held his ground.

"What're you doing?" he demanded.

Tentative, she reached up and ran her fingers over the wash of freckles on his left cheek. Silver's eyes went wide at the contact, and he pulled away.

"I just wanted to make sure you were real," she said.

They stood there in silence for a moment as Green did her best to memorize his face. He was so young, like her, and she'd never even seen his face in the two years they'd been with the Masked Man.

Without warning, Silver reached for her mask and pulled. Green's instinct was to turn away, but she stayed still and let the green mask fall away. Silver's eyes roamed her newly revealed face like it was the first time he'd ever laid eyes on another person. Tears welled in her eyes and she grabbed his hand and brought it to her cheek.

"I'm real, too."

Something changed in Silver that day, something subtle that only she seemed to notice as the weeks turned to months. Instead of quietly chomping at the bit, he became more subdued. Patient. They fought as commanded, patched each other up, and wore their masks like a second skin. And all the while, Silver waited. Patient.

"You and me," he confided in her late one night while they hid themselves under the covers, masks off, as a blizzard raged outside. "We're alone in this together."

And together they stayed.

On Green's eleventh birthday, someone came for Silver and her. The woman was pretty, she remembered thinking, and the man had soft eyes, inviting.

"It's time to go," the woman had said.

Team Rocket's child soldier program was in its fledgling years, and Green and Silver had been the second batch of guinea pigs. Except back then, there was no Team Rocket. They were just 'the Team', and the man and woman that had brought her in were the Masked Man's first protégés to showcase his particular brand of 'care'.

"What's your name?" the woman had asked.

"Green."

The woman just smiled softly, but it wasn't a nice smile. "Not anymore. From now on, you're Ivy. And he's Marco, not Silver. Okay?"

"Okay."

Okay.

Sometimes Ivy would lie awake at night just seeing the color green. She saw it in the stars, in the moon, in Umbreon's glowing eyes when it stirred from its slumber. There wasn't much she could remember before the color green. Before this life.

"*You look good in green, kid."*

She liked that he'd said that. Lance, the Dragon Master. Like it validated all those sleepless nights. Like it was worth something.

But that was a silly thought for a silly little girl who'd only ever been little in that small, dark hole the Masked Man had kept her in as he watched her, waiting for something. Or maybe just because.

Will and Karen were the ones that brought Ivy and Marco to the Team after their time spent with the Masked Man. They were too old, he'd said. Time to find new specimens. Karen had a smile like she had secrets, and secrets were powerful. Ivy liked secrets.

"Ivy, would you like a Pokémon?"

Karen handed her a small, red and white ball without waiting for an answer. In Ivy's eleven-year-old hands, the ball was large and a little heavy.

"Go on, it's yours."

Ivy dropped the Pokéball and Larvitar, still a newborn, toppled out from within the flash of light. Its eyes were barely open.

"See? It's green, so you don't have to be anymore."

But nothing is free.

The lesson was learned anew when the next day, a Grunt was ordered to attack Ivy and Larvitar with his Raticate. The rodent was vicious and unforgiving, and Larvitar was more afraid than ferocious at barely a month old. When Raticate got ahold of its head and bit down hard in an attempt to crack the skull, Ivy threw herself into the arena and started beating the hell out of the feral rodent with a stick. Raticate

was fast and strong. It ripped out a chunk of her shoulder, but she grabbed it by the scruff of its neck and slammed it on the ground. She couldn't say how many times she stomped on Raticate's head with her booted foot as she imagined it crunching Larvitar's skull like an eggshell. By the time they pulled her out of there, the rodent was nothing more than a pulpy, red mess. Her white boots were covered in blood and rat entrails, but she wore them the rest of the year. Recruits only got new uniforms when they outgrew the old ones, no exceptions.

Marco saw her bloody boots and the passed out Larvitar in her arms later that night, and he didn't say a word. He just got on his hands and knees and started scrubbing them with an old towel, the one they gave him for showering. Ivy cried that night, the first time since she'd forgotten how in that dark, cold place under the Masked Man's voyeuristic gaze.

As she got older, so did Larvitar. Karen gave her an Eevee and taught her how to evolve it into Umbreon. She liked Dark Pokémon, Karen.

"The night isn't so scary when the things that go bump are on your side."

Ivy caught a Houndour a few years later with those words in mind. The four of them—Karen, Will, Ivy, and Marco—stuck together within the Team. Karen and Will were older and more experienced, so they were promoted to Admin status a few years after Ivy and Marco joined the fold. But the four of them always found time to train and spar together. Those years were the best and the worst, the times when it almost felt like she had friends until she remembered *why*.

True to his word, there was hardly ever a day when Marco wasn't by her side. They were bonded, imprinted upon each other like the scars they'd exchanged as children. And he was the only one she really trusted. The day the Team became Team Rocket, the founder addressed the members at the main base west of Blackthorn City. Giovanni D'Argento had a commanding but charismatic presence in his pressed suit, matching fedora, and perfectly clean-shaven face. Ivy was barely sixteen when he announced that the new Team Rocket was successfully entering Kanto as a scion of hope and peace after the Great War ended a decade and a half ago. It would be Team Rocket, he argued, that would be the bridge between two great civilizations that had been feuding for centuries now that a shaky ceasefire had been called.

"The world is a dangerous place. Monsters are real, and they've ruled these lands for millennia," he'd said. "But only the strongest can carry the weight of a crown. We, Team Rocket, will usher in a new era for all mankind!"

There was a lot of hooting and hollering that day, and the Grunts like Ivy and Marco even got a glass of champagne to celebrate the big step forward for Team Rocket. Marco wasn't in the mood to celebrate, though, and Ivy wasn't about to have fun alone.

"He's right about the world being a dangerous place," Marco said once they were alone in their shared room. "Monsters are real, but the ones he meant aren't the ones we should be afraid of."

They didn't celebrate at all that night or on future nights when Team Rocket announced their victories across the continent and finally their expansion into Kanto.

On her last day as a member of Team Rocket, Ivy was dressed in a floor-length, jade evening dress with her long hair up and makeup accenting her features. Marco wore a pressed tuxedo and blended in with the rest of the men, except for his shoulder-length, auburn hair that he refused to cut no matter how many times she insisted he would look good with it short.

Team Rocket was hosting a lavish gala for the Elite Four in Blackthorn City. Johto's wealthy one percent would be in attendance, as would their checkbooks. Further fundraising was needed to continue aggressive expansion plans into Kanto and take Team Rocket's presence there to the next level. The Elite Four's buy-in could be a game changer for Team Rocket, but the elusive, nonpartisan organization had given little indication of its collective stance on Team Rocket's efforts. Having been promoted to Admin status almost a year prior, Ivy and Marco had the good fortune of attending the gala as guests rather than remaining stationed around the perimeter on guard duty with the rest of the Grunts.

"Don't forget," Marco said as he squeezed her hand. "Be at the doors at midnight sharp. The Grunts'll be switching out then and the bikes won't be guarded."

Ivy nodded. "One more night and we're free."

They parted ways to network and mingle with the guests as their leader expected. Ivy swiped a glass of sparkling water before anyone

could get the dumb idea to try offering her alcohol. She would need to be functioning at one hundred percent tonight if the plan was going to go off without a hitch.

"Ivy, I was just talking about you," Karen said.

She beckoned her over, and Ivy plastered a polite smile to her face. Karen looked stunning in a sequined, violet dress with a long cut that reached mid-thigh. She was speaking to two people Ivy recognized by reputation alone.

"Lorelei, Lance, I'd like you to meet Ivy. She's something of a little sister to me."

For two of the most powerful trainers in the world, they didn't look much different from any of the other guests in attendance tonight. Still, there was an air of aloof calm about them that reminded Ivy of grey storm clouds on the horizon—harmless at a distance, but get too close you were bound to attract a little lightning.

Lorelei gave Ivy a frigid once-over but nodded politely. "Charmed."

Yeah, right.

"The pleasure is all mine," Lance said.

Before she could say anything, he plucked her glass from her hand and swapped it for a champagne flute a passing waiter carried.

"Please, this is a night to celebrate."

Ivy bit her cheek but smiled easily. A smile was perhaps her most powerful weapon, much more so than the titanium alloy knife strapped to her inner thigh under her dress. With the twitch of a few muscles, even the most suspicious people could be lulled into a sense of security.

"Here's to the Elite Four, then, for coming all this way," she said.

They clinked their glasses together and everyone took a sip. Lance had the look of a mafia boss from a few decades ago. His red hair was spiked stylishly and contrasted with his nearly black eyes. His tuxedo even smelled expensive, and he carried himself with a poise so easy and confident that even if she didn't know who he was, she would have picked him out from the room as a key stakeholder.

Lorelei was the opposite of Lance in almost every way. Where he was easygoing and confident, she was rigid and suspicious. Her deep, blue stare behind rimless glasses was chilly and off-putting, and even the baby blue dress and thick, chestnut hair only served to sharpen her angles rather than soften them out. There was a draft in the air about her, like she radiated cold instead of heat. Ivy instantly disliked her.

"Well, I'm only here for the free food and drinks," Lance joked.

Karen chuckled, but Lorelei remained stony-faced and taciturn.

"Ivy, I was just telling Lance and Lorelei about Team Rocket's plans for further expansion into Kanto," Karen said. "As you both know, we already have a presence there, but there's so much more we can do. Of course, the cities with Gyms have adequate protection from the wilds and highly functioning municipal systems, but we're more concerned about smaller towns, like Pallet and Lavender."

"Karen, enough about the politics. This party is for merrymaking," Lance said. "Why don't you join me for a dance?"

"Oh no, I'm not big on dancing."

"Excellent. I find those types to be the best partners. Please, I insist."

She reluctantly held out her hand and let him lead her to the dance floor. With nothing further to say, Ivy excused herself from Lorelei's presence and dumped her barely touched champagne on an hors d'oeuvre table. All this talk of Team Rocket and expanding its influence was making her sick to her stomach. For years she'd been fed the same tripe with no chance to question it. But since her recent promotion to Admin, she got a real look at Team Rocket's so-called ambitions for a new world order—or takeover. And she wanted no part of them at all.

Giovanni was near the front of the room conversing with the Elite Four's Agatha and Bruno, who looked as though they'd just heard an indecorous joke. In a world where no one could be trusted, Ivy wondered what the most powerful group of Pokémon trainers around thought of Team Rocket's goals and how they would react. It was too soon to tell.

The hours passed, and Ivy got roped into conversations with other Rocket Admins as well as a few wealthy Johto elites.

"Ms. Harvey, I understand you're rebuilding the Goldenrod Radio

Tower," said Ariana, a Rocket Admin in a red cocktail dress that matched the bloody shade of her hair. "I would love to discuss our plans with you more, and I think your radio tower could be just the thing we need for a project I'm working on."

Helena Harvey, a middle-aged woman in a conservative, black dress with a blonde bun wound so tight Ivy was sure her eyes might pop out, sipped her champagne. "I don't mean this the wrong way, but I'm envisioning the radio tower as a community project. I want people to be able to communicate not just around Johto, but in Kanto and Hoenn, too. High speed communication is a basic human right. I don't know how I would feel handing that over to your organization at this stage, if at all."

Ariana demurred. "Why don't I tell you a little more about my project? Here, let me refill your glass. We've nicknamed the project 'Chimera'..."

Ariana walked off with Ms. Harvey and didn't so much as glance at Ivy, which was just fine. Chimera was Team Rocket's newest baby, and even most Admins didn't have the clearance to know the finer details. All Ivy knew so far was that it was a two-part project with both an emotional and physical aspect that would somehow make Pokémon easier to tame and thus bring a new degree of guaranteed safety to frontier towns and unguarded Routes between human settlements. At least, that was the snake oil they were selling to anyone without the proper clearance. She squeezed her glass, but caught herself before she shattered it. Pretending to check her reflection in a compact, Ivy checked the clock on the back wall—11:37 pm. It was nearly time to go, and she needed to get out of this dress.

Heading for the kitchen where she'd stashed her pack, Ivy almost ran into Lance when he appeared in front of her on his way to grab some food from a passing waiter.

"Oh, Ivy, was it? Where're you off to in such a rush?"

Shit.

"Bathroom. Please excuse me."

He stepped in front of her as she tried to get around him. "But the bathroom is that way." He pointed over her shoulder in the opposite direction.

"That one has a line. There's another one through the kitchen." The lie was so easy and smooth she believed it herself.

He grinned, and she couldn't help but notice that his incisors were sharper and a bit longer than normal. This close, in fact, he looked different than he had before. His hair wasn't styled so much as frozen in place, like it was thicker and heavier than normal hair. And the black of his eyes was so deep and dark that it was almost animalistic. Yet his smile was still that same, easy-going grin from before. She blinked and shook off the strange feeling, and he took a step back.

"Well, far be it from me to stand in your way."

"Excuse me."

He grabbed her wrist as she attempted to get away again, and his grip was firm and cold. She couldn't explain it, but she felt tiny and breakable in his grip, like at any moment his skin might peel away and turn to jagged scales.

"You look good in green, kid."

She stared back at him for a few breaths, utterly at a loss for what to say to that. He smiled at her again, and she smiled back on instinct.

"See you around," he said softly.

He let her go and disappeared back into the crowd. Ivy rubbed her wrist and shivered, suddenly cold. His fingers had been cold as ice, and despite the warmth of his smile, she had to wonder if that was a compliment at all.

Giovanni called for everyone's attention, and the crowd began to pipe down and take seats at the round tables set up around the wide room. Ivy grabbed a tray of empty champagne flutes and held them at eye-level as she retreated to the kitchen in case anyone noticed her leaving. Once there, she walked as fast as she could in her heels to the back where the trash chute was. Without hesitation, she unzipped her dress in the back and stepped out of it. Then she kicked off her heels and tossed the bundle down the trash chute. Her pack was in the air vent just above the metal chute, and she jiggled the pane free and retrieved it. As she was pulling her pants on, a waiter walked by and gasped.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Miss! I didn't see anything!"

Swearing, Ivy quickly pulled on her black shirt and green cargo jacket before shouldering the pack and taking off through the back door without answering the flustered waiter. He would surely alert someone that he'd walked in on a half-naked woman in the kitchen, of all places, and she needed to be long gone before then.

Outside, the stars were brilliant and bright. Blackthorn was nestled at the base of Frost Mountain, which separated it from its higher altitude neighbor, Mahogany Town. The air was cool and smelled of pine, though the scent of Ariana's perfume still lingered in her nose. She rubbed it for good measure and jogged around the corner.

"There you are. I thought you'd lost track of time."

Marco, also changed out of his formal wear and all in black and denim now, was busy securing his pack to the back of a dirt bike. It was one of a dozen parked and chained that belonged to the Rocket Grunts on duty.

"Damnit," Ivy swore as she slung her pack over the bike next to Marco's and tied it down. "We can't take these while they're chained up."

"I got it." Marco threw a Pokéball and his Sneasel appeared. It lumbered awkwardly on all fours and made a sucking noise.

"Cut through these chains."

Sneasel sat up on its haunches and uncurled its claws. Ivy watched in morbid curiosity as its folded hands straightened and separated into deadly talons. Something about the way it moved gave her the creeps, but Sneasel made short work of the metal chains and sliced through them like they were nothing but paper.

"C'mon, we have to go. Those Grunts'll be back any—"

"Hey! What're you doing back there?"

A pair of Rocket Grunts shined a flashlight at Ivy and Marco and began jogging over.

"Time to go." Ivy mounted her dirt bike and revved it up. She and Marco peeled out and nearly ran over the advancing Grunts, who jumped out of the way just in time.

"They'll sound the alarm!" Ivy called to Marco over the hum of their

engines.

"Then we better move!"

Route Forty-Five was a jagged mountain pass that, while a straight shot south to New Bark Town, was a fairly constant thirty-eight degree slope and riddled with mountain death traps such as falling rocks, thirty-foot ledges, and fearsome Pokémon like Graveler and Skarmory that liked to make their nests in the mountainside. It offered an excellent deterrent to anyone hoping to sniff around Team Rocket's headquarters outside Blackthorn, but a not-so-ideal escape route for those who wanted out. After thirteen years of brutality and brainwashing, though, Marco and Ivy were not easily deterred.

From Route Forty-Five, they would have to pass through part of Dark Cave and continue to New Bark Town via Route Forty-Seven. In the dark and on the run was not the best way to navigate the badlands between Blackthorn and New Bark, but they didn't have much of a choice. Ivy didn't think they had more than twenty or thirty minutes before the Rocket Grunts they'd mowed down ratted them out and a team was organized to hunt them down.

Marco skidded to avoid a crag that his flood light illuminated at the last minute. On either side of them, cliffs rose and peaked into mountains. They were vertical and smooth in certain areas were slabs of shale had come loose and crashed to the ground. Pine trees peppered the mountainside, and Ivy had to steer carefully to avoid them. For the first ten minutes of hard steering and instant start-stops, they encountered no problems. But when Marco went over a ledge and landed hard on the ground below, the earth erupted under him and sent him flying. A massive Graveler roared and picked itself up out of the rubble where it made its home under the ledge. It pounded its armored belly and charged. Ivy threw a Pokéball and released Umbreon.

"Smash it, Umbreon!"

Umbreon soared through the air and collided with Graveler's shoulder. The Iron Tail attack was enough to send Graveler stumbling, and it screeched in pain. But it kept coming.

"You gotta hit it in the back of the head!" Marco said as he frantically tried to right his dirt bike. "That's their only weak spot!"

"Coulda told me that earlier!"

Graveler was on a mission to bulldoze Umbreon into the ground, but the black feline was better suited to the darkness of night than it, and dodging was an easy matter.

"Croconaw, blast it!"

Marco released his Croconaw and the ferocious alligator shot a powerful jet of water from its gaping maw. The water collided with Graveler's left side as it made a swipe for Umbreon, and the walking boulder lost its balance.

"Oh, crap! Umbreon!"

Ivy hastily revved her bike and recalled Umbreon just as Graveler rolled down the hill where she'd been situated not a second earlier. It made a thunderous booming sound as it fell down the mountainside, disturbing whatever lay below them.

"C'mon, we gotta move!"

Marco had recalled Croconaw and was already speeding ahead toward one of Dark Cave's many entrances. Lights flashed on overhead as motion detectors picked up their movement. Team Rocket used the shallower chambers of this cave for its R&D projects. At least, that was what they told the Grunts and anyone unaffiliated with the top brass. Ivy followed Marco around a tight corner and gritted her teeth as the bike's wheels skidded.

Voices reached them up ahead, but Marco only sped up. They burst into a wide cavern that had been cleared out for Rocket scientists and their grisly research. Stainless steel tables lined the walls and personnel hunched over them absorbed in their work. Some were dissecting Pokémon carcasses while others scribbled notes or fiddled with complex machinery. The stench of formaldehyde and bleach combined in a pungent cocktail that only barely masked the decay that clung to the air. In the middle of the room, there was a makeshift arena where a Machamp was busy pummeling the life out of an Ursaring. Even outside the setting, it was highly unusual to see such a matchup, as Machamp and Ursaring rarely crossed paths and were not natural enemies.

The fight forced Ivy and Marco to stop their flight. Scientists and Rocket Grunts working in the underground lab stopped what they were doing and began to shout in confusion.

"What the fuck?" Marco reached for Croconaw's Pokéball again.

Ivy saw it, too. The Machamp's second set of arms had been amputated, and sewn into into their place were blade-like appendages, almost like a Scyther's limbs. Purple spikes protruded from its back and dripped a dark, viscous substance. Poison, no doubt, but Machamp didn't produce poison naturally. It also wore some kind of headgear that looked like a metal spider had latched onto its head. Most disturbing of all were its eyes, which had been gouged out to make room for the machinery's wandering tentacles.

Ursaring, however, was in worse shape. The fight must have been going on for some time because it was bleeding heavily and missing an arm. The limb had been torn or perhaps sliced off and lay in a bloody heap a few feet away. Ursaring's mouth was gaping, its jaw disconnected. Its teeth were unnaturally large and slicked with drool, cartoonish in their disproportion with the bear's small head. They were the kind of jaws one might expect to find on a Feraligatr. And instead of its usual, golden fur, Ursaring's back bore thick patches of rough, grey scales reminiscent of the Graveler Ivy and Marco had taken out earlier that night.

"Hey! You're not supposed to be here," one of the scientists said. "Chimera's a need-to-know project. Machamp, Ursaring, kill them!"

The scientist carried a portable computer with him and punched in some kind of code. Machamp howled as if in pain and slammed its arms on the ground hard enough to cause a tremor. It then lunged at Marco and Ivy.

"Shit!"

They revved up their bikes again and tore through the room, splitting up and each taking a side. Machamp followed Marco, while Ursaring barreled after Ivy. The bear bellowed and picked up a table with its remaining hand to fling at her. The dirt bike was fast and easy to maneuver, though, so she swerved out of its path. The pair of scientists it hit, however, were not so lucky. They crashed into the nearby cave wall, bisected at the waist where the table slammed into them. Their entrails spilled down the table's surface as their top halves toppled to the ground, still twitching for a few seconds before falling still.

"Larvitar!"

Ivy released her Larvitar, and the little green dinosaur hit the ground running. It saw the charging Ursaring and lowered its head.

"Bash it!"

Larvitar lunged forward just as Ursaring drew back its thick fist for a punch and collided with the bear's belly. Larvitar's horn stabbed through Ursaring's thick hide and knocked the wind out of it, sending it toppling backward onto its rear.

Ivy abandoned her bike and ran around behind Ursaring while Larvitar kept it busy. She grabbed the first thing she could find—a rusty pipe piece—and slammed it over Ursaring's head where the same tentacled machine was attached and boring in through all its orifices. Ursaring grunted and threw back its head to snap its oversized jaws at Ivy. This close up, she noticed some of the teeth were reinforced with metal gums, like they'd been implanted directly into Ursaring's mouth.

Larvitar went for the throat when it saw the opening and bit down through the shale scales protecting it. They shattered under the dinosaur's powerful jaw and Larvitar tore out Ursaring's windpipe. The big bear fell to the ground, motionless, and the tech on its head writhed as though it were sentient and sensing its host was dead. Larvitar continued to gnaw at Ursaring's throat to get at the soft flesh beyond the tough, implanted scales and consume it.

Meanwhile, Marco had somehow managed to get the Machamp to punch the wall of the cave, where one of its scythe arms was now firmly stuck. Sneasel was crawling up its back and attempting to get at the tech on its head, but the venomous spikes embedded in Machamp's back and neck threw off the weasel's aim. Sneasel's sharp claws sliced through some of the tech's spidery appendages, but the effort wasn't enough to disable it.

"Damnit, kill him!" The scientist controlling Machamp was punching buttons on his computer again.

Machamp roared and pulled with all its might, and Ivy watched, horrified, as it ripped the bladed appendage right out. A gaping hole where the appendage used to be gushed with blood and splattered to the floor under Machamp's feet. It then tried to reach around its back to get at Sneasel.

"Larvitar, Rockslide!" Ivy shouted.

Larvitar looked up from its meal, and its green snout was splattered with blood and bits of torn flesh. It abandoned Ursaring and ran to the other side of the cave where Machamp had finally managed to grab

Sneasel and throw it as hard as it could at the wall. Marco scooped up his unresponsive Pokémon, hands trembling.

Machamp swung around with its fists, and Marco backtracked. The scythe caught him in the forearm, and he cried out as he reached for Croconaw's Pokéball. Larvitar had made it to the other side of the cave and kept going until it rammed the wall with all its hardheaded might. The impact created a crack that spidered up toward the ceiling. Overhead, one hanging lamp fell loose from its hold in the cleaved ceiling and crashed to the ground with a pop. Then another fell, and another, until soon the ceiling itself was beginning to crumble and collapse. People screamed and tried to evacuate as they sensed the inevitable.

"Hydro Pump!" Marco commanded.

The blue alligator buried its claws in the cave floor, raised its tail for balance, and spat out a highly pressurized stream of water that hit Machamp in the chest and threw it off kilter. It ended up stumbling backward into the rockslide Larvitar had caused. Heavy boulders and debris fell on top of it, breaking its bones and smashing the machinery controlling it. Ivy reached Marco and helped him up.

"I'm fine. We have to go!"

The whole cave was beginning to collapse. They recalled their Pokémon and Marco mounted his bike. Ivy ran back toward hers, but a Rocket Grunt tried to intercept her with a knife. She ducked his swipe but tripped over rubble and ended up landing hard on her hip. The Rocket Grunt brought his knife down again, but it never met its target. Marco's engine revved nearby, and the Grunt groaned in surprise before losing his balance and falling flat on his face. A thick hunting knife was embedded in the back of his neck.

"Move!"

She ignored the flare of pain in her thigh and retrieved Marco's knife from the Grunt's neck before racing back to her bike. Marco was already speeding toward the exit, but just as Ivy was about to follow, she saw that one of the Pokémon a scientist had been dissecting was a Golbat, and it was alive.

It looked as though the scientist had abandoned his work halfway through. Golbat's left eye had been scooped out with a spoon and set aside, leaving the socket to fill with blood and pous. Its wing was broken and the bone was exposed, and the bat's frantic flapping was

only making the injury worse. She and Marco had intervened before the deranged Rocket scientists could fit Golbat with the brainwashing tech or harvest it for parts for their patchwork creations. There was no time, but she couldn't leave the poor thing to die like that. Reaching for a spare Pokéball at her belt, Ivy went to Golbat and prepared to catch it. The bat only renewed its attempts to get free.

"It's okay, I'm here to help."

There would be nothing left to help if she didn't hurry up and get out of there. A large rock fell from the ceiling and crashed on the table next to Golbat, sending the animal sliding to the right as its shackles kept it stuck to the table. Ivy tapped it with the empty Pokéball, and Golbat disappeared inside it. She pocketed her catch and quickly got back on her bike just as the entrance caved in. Rocks and debris crashed down onto her back, and she gritted her teeth against the pain and hoped she hadn't broken a rib. Free of the cavern and its assault, she sped down the winding tunnel until she caught up with Marco.

He was waiting for her on the other side. "Where the hell were you?"

"Sorry, let's go."

Their lights and high speed warded off any stray Pokémon lurking in the shadows of Dark Cave, and soon they were outside and speeding down Route Forty-Seven. Marco skidded to a stop to look back. They could see Blackthorn from here, and there was an army of lights descending Route Forty-Five to the south of it.

"That was fast. Damnit," Marco said.

"It's okay, we're almost in the clear."

His arm was still bleeding, but he didn't seem to notice. Her own back felt unusually warm, and she suspected she was bleeding. The ache made it hard to breath. She wanted to say something, but there would be time later to worry about their injuries.

"Let's go."

He led the way down Route Forty-Seven, and Ivy tried to ignore the blistering pain in her hip every time she went over a ledge or skidded to avoid a sleeping Geodude. A pair of Skarmory squawked as they passed and looked like they would give chase, but the dirt bikes moved fast and made an unnatural noise that made the birds wary. Even with the thick smell of pine and petrichor in the air, Ivy had a

hard time forgetting the scent of decay and old blood back in the Dark Cave lab. The memory of Ursaring's bleeding jaw where some sadistic scientist had implanted Feraligatr fangs into metal gums made her want to throw up even with the rush of night wind that cooled her face as she rode.

After another half hour of riding, it became apparent that the chase had been slowed down considerably by the cave in they'd caused. New Bark was just a stone's throw away, and the incline had evened out as pine trees were replaced with tall, golden grass. Even several miles out of town, Ivy could taste the salt from the ocean. Freedom.

They ditched their bikes in a copse where they were hidden from sight and continued into town on foot. Marco clutched his wounded arm, and Ivy tried to keep up with his pace despite her limp.

"Marco, I don't think we should split up."

"We talked about this. It's the only way. You have to go to Kanto. We're going to need the Gym Leaders' support."

She bit her lip. "I know, but the Elite Four—"

"—can't do much on their own. And that's even assuming they'd be on our side. You saw how Team Rocket was schmoozing them tonight. Money and power talk. At the end of the day, they're just four people against a whole army of Pokémon Trainers under that tyrant's thumb. "

Marco hated Giovanni with a passion. Everything about the man was repulsive to him ever since he gave that first speech about expanding into Kanto several years ago.

"You really think the Gym Leaders'll be enough to convince the Elite Four to intervene?" she said.

"They have to be. It's a catch-22—we need the Gym Leaders to convince the Elite Four, but only the Elite Four can force the Gym Leaders into action. That's why it's up to you and me."

She stopped walking. "I'm afraid."

The stars were as brilliant and bright here as they were higher up in Blackthorn, and they reflected in Marco's eyes, bathing them in a silver light that made him look like some kind of knight from another world, someone who could make the impossible possible. Ivy had

always drawn strength from him just as he drew strength from her. And now she would lose him, the only true friend she'd ever known, the brother she'd grown to love, perhaps never to see again in this life. Giovanni may be a tyrant, but he was right about one thing—the world was a very dangerous place.

"We knew what getting out would mean." Marco put a hand on her shoulder and looked down into her bright, blue eyes. "We can't stand by and let Team Rocket infect the world with their rot. Chimera's proof enough of that. We know better than anyone that they don't want peace or to help the little guy; they want power, and they don't care who they step on to get it. Giovanni has to be stopped. We can't give up until every last one of those scumbags is six feet under."

Ivy nodded. "I know, and I'm with you. But...what about Will? Karen..."

"They're with Team Rocket. They could've gotten out like you and me, but they're still there. Look, I'm sorry, Ivy. I know how you feel about Karen, but she's not the priority. This is so much bigger than you and me."

"Maybe she and Will'll help us when the time comes."

He closed his eyes and drew a steadying breath. "I really hope so. But you're the only person I trust, so I'm not holding my breath."

Ivy pulled him into a hug and clenched her fingers around his unkempt, auburn hair. She had the passing thought that she wouldn't have been able to do this if he'd listened to her and cut it short, after all. "I can't lose you, Marco. I can't."

He hugged her back. "You won't. I swear it. C'mon, we have to find Professor Elm."

It was nearly four in the morning by the time they reached Professor David Elm's house in New Bark Town. Never one to consider things like decorum when he needed something, Marco pounded on the front door of the man's private residence until the light in the kitchen came on and a frazzled man in a blue bathrobe opened the door. He blinked in surprised at the impromptu visitors at such an indecent hour and fumbled for his glasses.

"H-Hello, can I help you? Wait, do you have any idea what time it is?"

Marco didn't wait for an invitation and pushed past Professor Elm. The

man nearly fell over, and Ivy slipped inside after Marco.

"Hey! Now, you wait just a minute. I don't even know you! You can't come barging into my house like this!"

He then noticed how beat up Marco and Ivy looked and swallowed warily as he backed up into the living room.

"Now, see here, I don't want any trouble, all right? What do you want, money?"

Marco got in his face. "You're Professor David Elm, right?"

The man adjusted his glasses nervously. "Y-Yes?"

"Then we need your help. We're on the run from Team Rocket."

"Team what now? Oh... Rocket, I've heard of them. We don't get much of them here in our sleepy little town."

"Daddy?"

A little girl peeked down at the commotion from the stairs. She was in a pink onesie decorated with smiley faces and held a Teddiursa doll in her arms. Her eyes were wide and scared as she watched her father and his guests through the stair railing bars.

"Ah, Allison, it's okay, sweetie, just go back to bed."

"Daddy, who's that?"

Ivy stepped forward. "Professor, we're not here to hurt you or your family. Please, we just need your help for the night. We know you're no friend to Team Rocket, and that's why we came to you."

He looked at a loss for words, but after a moment's consideration, he sighed. "Allison, it's okay. Daddy will be up soon, okay? Go stay with Mommy."

Allison nodded and scampered back upstairs. Professor Elm ran a hand through his short, balding hair.

"All right, this is all very sudden. Let me just get some coffee going."

He went to the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee.

"Professor, do you have a medical kit?" Ivy asked.

"And a recovery unit for Pokémon?" Marco added.

Professor Elm looked up at them, then looked back at his coffee machine that was still warming up. He sighed dejectedly and trudged back toward them.

"Okay, I'll skip the coffee. Give me five minutes and meet me in front of my lab next door."

By the time Ivy and Marco had gotten themselves patched up, Sneasel and Golbat in recovery tanks, and explained why they had barged into Professor Elm's house in the middle of the night, the sun was already breaching the horizon and the three of them were nursing their second cups of coffee.

"So let me get this straight," Professor Elm said. "You really think the two of you can bring down a huge, international crime syndicate like Team Rocket? Forgive me, but I'm still skeptical as to the efficacy of your plan."

"It's just like we explained. If we can get the Gym Leaders on board, the Elite Four won't have a choice but to stand up, too. One way or the other, Team Rocket's going down."

Professor Elm sipped his coffee. "Mm, yes, I understand the *logistics* of it, but I'm a little worried about how effective they'll prove. Take, for example, the fact that there are many who actually support Team Rocket. Despite what you say, they *have* made positive impacts in certain areas of the country, here and in Kanto."

"Yeah, but only to the rich elite," Ivy said.

"The rich elite own over eighty percent of Johto's wealth. Like it or not, I'd say their opinions matter quite a bit."

Marco bared his teeth. "That's not the point. Chimera's an abomination, maybe the worst thing they've ever done to Pokémon. Think about when it's weaponized, because it *will* be weaponized. We saw it first hand, and we barely made it out alive. Team Rocket'll have the means to hold the entire world hostage once this project goes live."

Professor Elm shook his head. "Don't misunderstand me, I agree that Team Rocket is a menace and the world will be better off when they're gone." He took a moment to look between the two young people that

had stumbled onto his doorstep with an impossible goal and the will to make it a reality. "I suppose I'm just worried. What can two kids do?"

"We can be the first step," Ivy said. "Someone has to be."

"Ivy and I know Team Rocket and how they operate. No one else has that inside knowledge. They don't exactly have a good severance package, if you know what I mean."

Professor Elm put up a hand. "Yes, I get the idea. Goodness, Gym Leaders, the Elite Four, Team Rocket... It all seems so far away, in another league. But," he looked between the two young people looking at him expectantly, "I can tell that the two of you are strong. If you survived life with Team Rocket for this long and you still see the good in the world and want to fight for it, then I think there's no other word to describe you." He got up and went to his desk, where he rummaged around in a drawer and returned with a small slip of paper. "I have one ticket for the S.S. Aqua. I was going to use it to visit a colleague of mine in Pallet Town, but I think one of you will be able to put it to better use, all things considered. By the way, that's where you should start your mission in Kanto. From Pallet Town, it's just a few leagues north to Viridian City and the Viridian City Gym."

Ivy accepted the ticket and pocketed it. "Thanks, Professor."

He shook his head. "I can't believe I'm condoning this. You're both so young, and the world is a dangerous place."

"We're old enough, and we've seen the dangers of this world first hand. Ivy and I... We have to do this by any means necessary. If you can help us out, we'd appreciate it. But either way, we're doing this."

"If it's to bring down Team Rocket and destroy their hold over this country, then I'll do what I can, however little it may be."

After cleaning up and packing for her journey ahead, Ivy waited at the New Bark Harbor for the S.S. Aqua that was scheduled to make a stop on its way to Cinnabar Island in Kanto. Marco stood with her.

"The next time we see each other, it'll be to put an end to this once and for all."

Tears welled in her eyes, and she looked up at his profile as he gazed toward the horizon, bright with morning light. Kanto was the land of the rising sun, the old continent. The war had ended when Ivy was

still a small child, but the bad blood between the two countries still coursed strong. It was only the Elite Four that kept the balance, and now Team Rocket was attempting to usurp that balance and use it for their own personal gain. Ivy wanted them gone just as much as Marco.

"I'm holding you to that," she said.

Marco turned to her and pulled her into a fierce hug. "Stay alive. No matter what happens, we'll see each other again."

She choked on a sob. "You too."

The ship was pulling into the harbor, and it was massive. Ivy had never been on a ship before, but it was a hell of a lot better than flying, like Marco had originally suggested. There was no way she was getting anywhere near any birds, not since the last time one had scooped her up and dropped her in a new life that was no life at all. She would take her chances with seasickness any day.

Other passengers had gathered at the harbor to board the ship. These through-travelers were a large source of New Bark's local revenue. Olivine City was far away, and many people did not have the wherewithal or the Pokémon strong enough to make the journey all the way West. With one last look back at her brother in all but blood, Ivy let her hand slip from his and got in line to board. Marco watched her go with a heavy heart.

It took a little while for the ship's crew to properly dock the cruiser and help passengers disembark. Ivy waited patiently in line and thought about the Golbat she'd captured on her flight down here. Professor Elm's rejuvenation tanks had saved it's life, no doubt, but it was still in dire need of surgery and wary of her. Her heart broke for the Pokémon, unable to imagine the kind of torture and trauma it had gone through at the hands of Team Rocket. Voyeurs without scruples. Not even her years of brutal training, isolation, and life with Team Rocket could compare, she reasoned. At least she had both her eyes.

Once passengers were finished disembarking, the crew began accepting tickets from those passengers that wanted to travel on to Kanto. The line moved forward, and Ivy waited her turn. The bandages wrapped tightly around her back and shoulders were constricting, and every breath in brought with it a stab of pain in her broken and bruised ribs. There were a few people in front of her, including a guy in a large overcoat. She hadn't really been paying attention, but sleight of hand had always drawn her particular

interest, so she couldn't help but notice when the guy nicked a ticket from the cute blonde girl in front of him. Ivy almost burst out laughing.

Amateur.

Perhaps it was the moment, or a whim, or a fragment of her past with the Masked Man, but she'd always hated when grown men picked on little girls for no reason other than their own sadistic pleasure. So she pretended to trip and bumped into him.

"Oh, I'm *so* sorry!" she preened.

"It's fine," he said gruffly, pulling his coat tighter.

Ivy smiled sweetly and pocketed the ticket she'd stolen from him.

"Your ticket, Miss," the sailor clipping tickets said when the blonde girl reached the front of the line.

She wore a high ponytail and a baggy yellow dress over brown pants that made her look younger than she probably was. Ivy watched as she felt around her pockets for her ticket. Her lips pursed together in worry when she realized she couldn't find it.

"Um, I know it's in here somewhere? Oh, no..."

Ivy shoved past the guy in front of her, making sure to jostle him just because he was a fucking douchebag for stealing from a girl.

"Hey, I think you dropped this," she said, holding out the stolen ticket.

"Oh! Oh my god, that's my ticket! I must've dropped it somewhere. Thank you so much for returning it. I would've expected someone to just take it. N-Not that I think you're a thief or anything, but I'd probably want a free ride if I could get one. Wait, I *am* getting one since my company paid for this, haha..."

The sailor glowered at the two girls and held out his hands. "Tickets. Now."

Ivy handed the sailor both the girl's and her tickets, which he clipped to let them pass. As they walked up the plank to board the ship, she looked back and winked at the guy in the trench coat, who was now ticketless. He bared his teeth in a snarl, but the sailor forcibly escorted him off the harbor since he didn't have a ticket.

Once Ivy and the blonde girl were on board, Ivy examined her ticket and looked around for signs that would direct her to her cabin.

"Hey, thank you so much back there! I don't know what I would've done if I'd lost that ticket."

"Huh? Oh, no problem. But listen, that guy behind you? He stole your ticket. You're lucky I was there to steal it back. There's a lot of assholes crawling around looking for people to screw over. I'd watch my back, if I were you."

Satisfied, Ivy started walking away to find her cabin, but a hand on her wrist stopped her.

"Wait! You have to let me make it up to you. Please, oh please, I know I'm hopeless when it comes to this kind of thing. Actually, this is the first time I've been traveling on my own outside of Kanto, so it's all pretty new." She lit up, like she'd gotten an idea. "Can I see your ticket?"

"Uh, sure?"

Ivy handed it over, and the blonde girl quickly scanned it. "Aha, you're in steerage. Okay, as my way of saying thanks for helping me out back there, I want to invite you to stay with me in my cabin."

"That's nice of you, but I already have a cabin."

"I'm in first class."

Ivy thought about that for a moment. It wouldn't be good to get involved with anyone when she had a serious mission to focus on. "That's nice, but it's really not necessary—"

"In first class, we get unlimited buffet service and free drinks," the girl interrupted.

"...On second thought, I'd love to join you."

The blonde girl giggled. She took Ivy's hand and led her down the hall to the right.

"I'm Lily, by the way."

"Ivy."

Lily smiled brightly. "It's nice to meet you, Ivy."

Lily led her down the hall toward the first class cabins until she found the correct room.

"Here we are."

She opened the door, and Ivy's jaw dropped. The room was big enough to hold a small party. Back in Team Rocket, she'd bunked with Marco in a tiny room barely large enough for their bunk beds and a small bathroom without a door. This place was lavish by comparison with a huge king-sized bed outfitted with crimson drapes, a chaise lounge, a mini bar that was fully stocked, and an oaken table with four chairs for dining. There was a door in the far wall that led to a small bathroom complete with marble tiling and a claw foot bathtub.

"Is this okay?"

Ivy swallowed. "Oh yeah, this'll do."

Lily smiled brightly and set down her large backpack under the bed. Then she flung herself on the bed and sighed. Ivy went to explore the bathroom and was amazed to find that it looked like something out of a fancy hotel. It was hard to tell she was even on a ship heading for a different continent.

"So," Lily said, sitting up on the bed. "It's a five day trip to Cinnabar. What should we do first?"

Ivy bit back a smile. There was something instantly likeable about Lily, though she couldn't put her finger on it. There was only one person she trusted in all the world and she'd just lost him, perhaps forever. But in spite of that, something about Lily made her want to smile. In the middle of the ocean far away from her mission, from the chaos that followed her, and from the destruction that surely lay ahead, it was easy to forget, just for a little while.

"Well, it'd be a shame to let that free buffet service go to waste," she said.

Lily bared her teeth in devious smirk. "I'm thinking pancakes. Wait, you *do* like pancakes, right?"

"Banana pancakes?"

"Oh my *god*, those're my favorite! Hold on, lemme just put the order in."

Later that day as the S.S. Aqua was underway toward Cinnabar, Lily and Ivy sat together on the couch surrounded by empty plates. Lily had made herself quite at home and even released a few of her Pokémon. A female Pikachu was busy nibbling at a pancake Lily had set aside for it, and a Doduo had taken to perching at the window overlooking the sea, its two heads watchful and observant. Ivy didn't want to say anything about the bird, especially since this wasn't her room and Doduo were small and incapable of flight. But she made sure to sit on the far end of the couch and kept an eye on the bird in case it got the idea to hop over here. If Lily noticed her discomfort, she didn't mention it.

"What's that Pokémon? I've never seen it before," Ivy asked, peering down at the blue snail-like creature crawling on the floor.

Lily bent down and picked the creature up. It became nervous and retreated into its shell, which upon closer inspection shone with a pearlescent sheen, beautiful.

"This is Nauty, my Omanyte."

"Nauty?"

"Yeah, like Nautilus. He's an ancient Pokémon."

"Ancient Pokémon?"

"Mm-hm. Omanyte're actually extinct. They used to live at the bottom of the sea millions of years ago, but they're masters of buoyancy, so they can calibrate at any depth! Isn't that amazing?"

Omanyte peeked out of its chambered shell and felt about with its blue legs. Now that she had a better view, Ivy noticed that the Pokémon wasn't like a snail at all, but more hermit crab-like. Its dark eyes were large in proportion to its body, and they shifted between Ivy and Lily as the Pokémon attempted to tug at Lily's shirt.

"Wait a minute," Ivy said. "You said Omanyte's extinct? How's that possible when this one's still alive?"

Lily grinned, and Ivy had a feeling she'd been waiting for this question. "Well, that's because I revived Nauty from a fossil."

"Um...what?"

Lily nodded emphatically. "You're probably wondering how someone

like me can afford this cabin, right? The truth is I didn't pay for it, my employer did. I'm a paleogeneticist at Cinnabar Labs."

Ivy wasn't sure she could even pronounce that title without seeing it written down. "You're a scientist? Don't take this the wrong way, but how old are you?"

"I'm eighteen, but people always say I look young."

Ivy gave her a once over. Her clothes were baggy and hid her curves, and the way she smiled gave her an air of innocence that could easily make her seem younger than she really was. Lily was also a good six inches shorter than Ivy, which didn't help her cause.

"I never would've guessed you're only a year younger than me. Still, that's pretty young to be a paleo...um..."

"Paleogeneticist." She shrugged. "I dunno, I just always liked science ever since I was a little girl. My parents moved to Cinnabar when I was four, and that's where it started. I finished school pretty early, and by the time I was fifteen, I had this job. My first year there, I figured out how to extract Omanyte's DNA from a bunch of fossil samples the lab had collected over the years, and after that it was just a bit of tweaking with Poliwhirl and Shellder DNA to fill in the gaps to revive Nauty here." She patted Omanyte's smooth shell appreciatively.

She's a freaking genius, Ivy concluded.

"My boss sent me to the Marine Pokémon Laboratory outside New Bark Town to consult with one of their oceanographers about a deep sea expedition they recently did. They found some really neat fossils they couldn't identify, so I'm bringing them back with me. And, well, this is one of the perks." She gestured around the room.

Ivy swallowed. "That's a pretty amazing story."

"I just love science! I'm lucky I get to do the thing I love for a living."

Ivy looked over Lily's shoulder at Doduo, who had one head angled in the girls' direction while the other kept an eye on the seascape. Lily's Pikachu had curled up for a nap on the bed, but her ears twitched to catch sounds too faint for the human ear to discern.

"You seem to have some capable Pokémon with you, too."

"Oh, everyone on Cinnabar's a trainer. Blaine says we can't rely on the

Gym to protect everyone. We're on an island, after all, so we're open to attack on all sides."

"Blaine? You mean the Gym Leader?"

"Yeah, he's been around forever, but he's pretty energetic for a man in his seventies. And he's got some of the strongest Pokémon around. He's the one who founded the Fire Brigades back when Kanto was at war with Johto. They still train, too, in case Johto decides to invade again. Cinnabar's pretty isolated, so it's not like the mainland could send help fast."

Ivy had heard about the legendary Fire Brigades Cinnabar had employed during the Battle of Cinnabar almost fifteen years ago. They were land and air legions of trainers riding Arcanine, Rapidash, and Charizard known for their expert teamwork and combination fire attacks. Together, they had devastated many terrestrial and aerial attacks Johto had launched, slowing down the invaders on their way to the mainland. History remembered the Fire Brigades as a key player in the tide of the war, and many historians today agreed that the war would have raged on much longer if not for their efforts.

"But enough about me!" Lily crossed her legs and leaned back on the couch's armrest. She scratched Omanyte's chin, and the little nautilus seemed to relax. "What's your story? Are you staying in Cinnabar, or are you headed for the mainland? Is this your first time in Kanto? Oh! You're a trainer, right? What kind of Pokémon do you have?"

She fired off questions a mile a minute, and Ivy smiled. It would be easier to dodge them if Lily couldn't keep up with everything she'd asked.

"I have a few Pokémon with me, but one of them's been hurt pretty bad. I got him patched up in New Bark Town, but I think he's gonna need surgery."

Lily's expression fell. "Oh no, that's awful. What kind of Pokémon is it?"

Ivy hesitated a moment, wondering how much she should divulge. Lily seemed like no threat at all, just an inquisitive girl with a sunny disposition. But Ivy had learned never to trust anyone, especially not pretty girls or people who wanted to help for nothing in return.

"It's a Golbat. His wing's busted up. I'm actually not sure if he'll fly again. And he's also missing an eye."

Lily looked genuinely horrified. "Poor Batty."

Ivy quirked a brow at the nickname, and Lily noticed her confusion.

"Oh, I like giving all my Pokémon nicknames. That's Chuchu," she indicated Pikachu snoozing on the bed, "and that's Dody. I also have a Seadra, and she's called Scaly. I guess it's hard to find anyone in Cinnabar without a Water Pokémon on their team." She paused before adding, "Well hey, if your Batty's really that hurt, we should take it to the Pokémon Center when we get to Cinnabar. I'm friends with Nurse Joy, so she'll give you a good deal. By the way, did you know Nurse Joy's whole family works in Pokémon Centers around Kanto? They're not all actually named 'Joy', but she says it helps to give trainers a familiar face when they come in with their hurt Pokémon. It's kind of like going home. I like that."

Ivy studied the girl opposite her. "Why're you so eager to help me? You don't even know me. I could be a thief or a murderer for all you know."

"Huh? No way, I'd never believe that."

"Why not? For all you know, I could've been paid to meet you here and earn your trust by stealing and returning your ticket. You're an important scientist at a major research institution with access to information worth millions. That Omanyte alone is probably worth more than what you'll make in your entire lifetime to the right collector. How do you know I'm not working for someone like that?"

Ivy searched her eyes, but Lily's expression was unreadable. They were pretty eyes, a deep, amber color. Tranquil. For a moment, Lily looked many years older than she was as she held Ivy's challenging gaze.

"You cried when you said goodbye to your friend, the one with the red hair. You looked like you were gonna fall apart, like you'd never see him again."

Her answer caught Ivy off guard, and it showed. "You saw that?"

"You see a lot when people don't see you. I don't think someone brave enough to leave someone she loves so much would be here wasting her time trying to take advantage of me."

A pregnant silence stretched between the girls until a knock on the door interrupted it.

"House keeping," a voice said on the other side of the cabin door.

"Coming!" Lily slipped off the couch and plastered her usual, bright smile on to answer the door.

A woman in a uniform carrying an empty tray had come to take their used dishes. Lily took advantage of the new company and began firing off questions.

"So, is there anything to do on the ship? I was told by a colleague that the last time he traveled on this ship, there was a big party in the ballroom. Is there a dress code for that kind of thing?"

The maid said the Sea Ball had happened last night, but that there would be a chef's tasting in the dining room tomorrow night and that Lily and Ivy were welcome to attend as first class passengers.

"Hey, that sounds like fun! And I bet the food'll be super tasty," Lily said once the maid left. "Wanna check it out?"

"You're kind of weird. I don't think I've ever met anyone like you before."

Lily laughed. "You know? I get that a lot."

"About tomorrow, count me in. I'd never say no to good food, especially if it's free."

"Great!" Lily crossed the room to the bed where she'd left her luggage and began rifling through it. "Oh, and don't worry, I won't make you tell me your life's story. I didn't mean to pry." She found what she was looking for and tossed it to Ivy, who caught it reflexively. "That Max Potion'll take care of your back injuries and that limp if you drink it. I bet two sips'll do the trick."

Ivy gaped at the small bottle filled with viscous, blue liquid. "Oh my god, where did you get this?"

"Don't worry, it's an extra, so I don't need it. 'Sides, I don't think sleeping'll be very comfortable like that."

"Why're you helping me?" Ivy asked again.

Lily was busy carefully re-packing her bag. She looked back at the older girl over her shoulder. "Because I can."

Ivy couldn't think of anything to say to that, but Lily just smiled and

went back to her task. Ivy looked down at the Max Potion cradled in her hand. It was no bigger than a baseball with as much liquid, much more than she would need for her own injuries. It was a priceless gift, a Potion that could do almost anything short of reviving a Pokémon or a person from the dead.

What the hell?

She unscrewed the metal top and took two small sips. The effects were almost instantaneous as the ache she'd been carrying began to dull. The hairline fractures on her ribs that made every breath a stab in the back slowly faded from her awareness as the Potion worked its magic. Within the hour, she would be back to full health.

Lily was humming to herself as she pushed her bag back under the bed, plopped down next to Pikachu, and began scratching the yellow rodent's belly. Pikachu curled around her hand and squeaked in delight. Ivy watched them, relaxed as she let the Max Potion's cool effect allay her injuries and lull her into a sense of tranquility she could rarely remember feeling before in the presence of another.

Over the next couple of days, Ivy began to relax a little around her temporary roommate. She let out Umbreon, Houndour, and Larvitar to stretch their legs and keep watch at night while Lily's Pokémon slept.

"You must really like Dark Pokémon," Lily said as she admired Umbreon from afar. The black feline hadn't let Lily get close enough to pet it.

"Yeah, I guess so. They're strong." Ivy saw how Lily looked longingly at Umbreon. "Don't take it personally. She's standoffish with everyone."

Lily giggled. "Not with you. I guess she's a one-woman Pokémon, huh?"

Houndour, on the other hand, had taken an instant liking to Lily and wanted as much attention as it could get.

"They all have their quirks, I suppose."

"You know, Larvitar's sort of an ancient Pokémon, too. Well, it's not extinct like Omanyte, of course, but there are records that prove it was alive during Omanyte's time. I guess that makes it pretty ancient."

Larvitar was snoozing after the rather hefty meal it had consumed earlier that afternoon.

"Survival of the fittest," Ivy said. "Although lately, Larvitar sleeps a whole lot more than he used to. I think he's getting lethargic."

"Maybe he's getting ready to evolve. I hear some Pokémon go into hibernation when they're getting ready to evolve."

Ivy wondered. "Maybe. I've had him since I was eleven. That's a long time."

"Hey, I know! Let's bring Larvitar something back from the tasting tonight. What do you think?"

Ivy laughed. "I think you're trying to fatten him up."

"Nah, you and me'll get first dibs."

"Oh, like that's any better."

They both laughed at that, and Lily got up to stretch. "I kinda feel like exploring the ship a little more today. Did you know they have a weight room in here? I even heard they have a fifty meter pool! Isn't that crazy? I mean, it's kind of ironic, when you think about it. A pool on a ship that's sailing in the middle of the ocean?"

"C'mon, we can go see the pool if you want." Ivy checked her watch. "Actually, sunset's in about twenty minutes. I bet it's beautiful this far out in the ocean."

"Great idea! ChuChu, come on!"

Pikachu squeaked happily and climbed up Lily's shoulder. It dug a paw into her thick ponytail to maintain its balance and peered curiously over her shoulder.

"Houndour's gonna start whining if I leave him and take Umbreon. C'mon, boy." Ivy beckoned to the black canine and it bounded toward her with its tongue hanging out.

Umbreon, sensing she wasn't needed, padded over to the bed and curled up for a nap. Ivy and Lily exited their cabin and locked the door behind them. Houndour trotted along behind them and yipped happily.

The S.S. Aqua was a vast ship that could hold upwards of a thousand

passengers, only a quarter of whom were first class passengers. The ship itself was like a wandering city with all the amenities of home. And 'home' for the typical S.S. Aqua passenger was a country club with an unlimited supply of quality food, expensive alcohol, and creature comforts like massage parlors, lap pools, and even a casino. Ivy and Lily bypassed the material attractions and followed the signs in the narrow hallway to the deck.

Outside, the air was crisp and salty, a little chilly as the sea breeze swept in from the port's bow. Others had had the same idea of watching the sunset, and since the deck was mostly a communal area, there were passengers from all cabin classes congregating around tables and along the port railing to watch. Ivy and Lily found a spot on the railing near a young family of four with two little boys who were attempting to count down to the sunset, though they had to keep restarting at higher numbers whenever they counted down too quickly and the sun still had not set.

"Wow," Lily said. "I never knew a sunset could be so *pink*."

The Sea of Seasons, as it was called, separated the southeastern edge of Johto at New Bark Town from Cinnabar in Kanto. It was aptly named for its stunning sunsets that changed with the seasons. In Spring, as now, the sea was energetic and a little frothy, and the seascape was bathed in brilliant pinks, yellows, and purples. Ivy thought about Marco and wondered if he was watching the sun set at this very moment. Was he still in New Bark Town with Professor Elm? More than likely he'd already moved on toward Violet City where Gym Leader Falkner lived. Marco had always been all business. A pang of nostalgia tore at her heart.

"Ivy, look!"

Lily pointed enthusiastically at the ocean below where a school of Mantine and Mantyke were racing alongside the ship. The tiny Mantyke jettisoned through the water and breached the surface for a few seconds at a time before plummeting once more into the water. It was like a game to them to try to outpace the ship. Their larger relatives swam just below the surface like dark shadows watching over their young. Houndour barked down at them as if to warn them off.

The little boys next to them squealed in delight at the sight of the Mantyke breaking the water.

"Mom, it's flying! Look!"

"I see it, sweetie. Can you count how many there are?"

All of a sudden, one of the Mantine breached the water's surface and soared through the air. The family backed away from the railing, shielding their children as the enormous ray flapped its powerful fins and rose into the air just above the railing. Its wingspan had to be at least thirty feet across.

Ivy stared, awestruck, at the Pokémon as it floated past and sprayed water in its wake. The Mantine's eyes were as big around as her whole head, dark as they watched her and the other small humans on deck. The moment passed and Mantine fell back to the ocean with enough force to rock the ship. Ivy gripped the railing, which was now slick with seawater.

"Wow!" Lily said through delighted laughter. "That was amazing!"

"Yeah," Ivy said, still trying to remember how to breathe. "Yeah, it was."

Houndour and Pikachu shook out their fur to get the water out, perhaps more annoyed than august at the phenomenon they'd just witnessed. The sun was finally dipping below the horizon, and Ivy sort of wished she had a camera.

"So, you still wanna check out that chef tasting?" Ivy ventured.

"Do I! I thought you'd never ask."

They returned below deck and headed for the dining room with Pikachu and Houndour in tow. The spread was lavish, to say the least. Lily flashed her ticket to get them in.

"I'm sorry, ladies, but all Pokémon must remain in their Pokéballs," the concierge said.

Lily looked a little bummed, but in the end Pikachu and Houndour both disappeared back into their Pokéballs with the promise of dinner later.

When they got inside, they immediately felt a bit underdressed. Some of the patrons had gone so far as to don tuxedos and floor-length ballgowns. Ivy thought about the dress she'd dumped in the trash chute before she and Marco made their escape from Team Rocket's hideout and almost regretted throwing it away. But then she got a taste of an appetizer from a waiter passing by with a tray of food and

forgot all about it.

"Oh damn," she moaned.

"Ooh, what'd you get?"

"Some mushroom stuffed with home baked heaven, I think."

Another waiter walked by with a tray of champagne and offered it to the girls. Ivy's instinct was to refuse, but when Lily took one, she decided to live a little. Team Rocket was far away, and they had nothing but time to kill on this ship. Why not indulge just a bit?

The dining room itself was tastefully decorated in red and gold garnishing. There were tall windows on the western side that overlooked the seascape, which was still lit up in deep purples and blues despite the sun have dipped below the horizon. Small tables lined the four sides of the room, tall enough to stand around. Ivy and Lily grabbed a plate each of various finger foods and retreated to one of the tables to eat in peace.

"I have a confession," Lily said conspiratorially. "I've never really been to many of these hoity-toity parties. I usually stay home."

"And miss out on all the free food? You're crazy."

Lily giggled. "Maybe now I have some incentive. What about you? Ever been to one of those super shmoozy parties?"

Ivy thought about how she might answer for a moment. "Yeah, a few times."

"Really? What was it like? Did you wear a fancy dress? Ooh! Did you go with a date?"

There had been several black tie events she'd been to during her tenure as a Team Rocket Admin over the last year. They were all the same with the elegant dress code and rigid decorum. Unlike what Lily was probably fantasizing about, those parties had always been about networking and furthering Team Rocket's goals. Now that she thought about it, Ivy couldn't remember actually enjoying herself at any of those functions. She didn't even interact with Marco much. It was always a business affair.

Lily noticed the way Ivy's face fell and said, "Was it not as fun as in the movies?"

"Hm? Oh, no that's not it. I did get dressed up, but..." She trailed off and hesitated before adding, "But I only went to them for work. So there wasn't really occasion to have much fun."

"Oh, that's too bad. Still, that's a pretty cool work perk, getting to go to fancy parties, I mean. Did you meet anyone interesting?"

"*You look good in green, kid."*

Ivy repressed an unpleasant shiver at the memory. "Depends on your definition of interesting."

"More champagne?" A waiter in a spiffy white and black uniform stopped at their table with fresh champagne flutes.

"Sir, you have excellent timing." Lily exchanged her near-empty glass for a new one.

"Miss?" The waiter offered to Ivy next.

"Oh, no thank you."

He nodded and walked away.

"Actually, Lily, will you excuse me for a bit? I just have to use the restroom."

She sighed dramatically. "I *guess* I can try to survive without your company for five minutes. But I'm not making any promises."

Ivy grinned and promised she would be right back. The bathroom was just outside the dining room down the hall to the left. As she crossed the dining room, she took notice of the various guests indulging in the party and conversing among themselves. Her blue eyes scanned their faces only briefly, a habit she'd picked up from Will.

"*If you can't get a read on someone with just a single glance, then you might as well have your head in the clouds."*

No one jumped out at her as being suspicious (or worse, familiar), so she calmly made her way to the other end of the dining room. Above, the ceiling was decorated with mirrors and strategically placed lights that reflected off them to give the appearance of a full chandelier at a fraction of the power. Ivy scanned the mirrors to check her back and noticed a woman in a black dress also heading for the bathroom exit. She didn't think much of it, but just to be safe, she stopped at the mini

bar near the exit and ordered a whiskey straight up. The bartender passed her a tumbler filled a quarter of the way with thick, amber liquid. Ivy brought it to her lips to sip and tilted her head back to check the mirrors again. The woman in black had also stopped to examine a plate of appetizers as she asked the waiter about what they contained. Ivy threw back the whiskey and lowered the glass to her side as she slipped among the other bar patrons and once more headed for the bathroom.

Outside, the noise from the party echoed like a distant memory along the metal corridor. She walked at a sedate pace and entered the ladies' room, where she proceeded to examine her reflection in the mirror. A few moments later, the woman in black entered the bathroom and checked her purse for something. Ivy glanced at her askance and gripped the empty tumbler at her side. The woman had cropped, brown hair that framed her soft, round face, and she wore heavy eyeliner. Striking, in a word. Too noticeable. When the woman approached the sink, she pulled her hand out of her purse, presumably to produce a tube of lipstick for a touch up.

Ivy spun and made a grab for her shoulder, and she brought the tumbler down over the woman's head. The woman grunted in pain and dropped the knife she'd pulled out of her purse. Ivy brought her knee up to ram the woman in the stomach, but the woman was trained and caught her behind the knee. They both fell to the ground, Ivy on the bottom, and wrestled for a leg up.

The woman pulled back her fist and punched Ivy in the face. Grunting in pain, Ivy used her body weight to flip them and slam the woman's head against the metal trashcan built into the wall. The woman's eyes rolled backward in her head, but she continued to struggle and scratched with her nails.

The knife the woman had dropped lay two feet away, and the woman tried to pull it closer with her heeled foot. Ivy noticed what she was doing and gave her leeway enough to sit up, as though she had the upper hand. Ivy took a hard chop to the windpipe, but with their new positions she was able to grab the woman's arm and flip her around so the woman was in front of her. Ivy then wrapped her arm around the woman's neck and yanked with all her might.

There was a distinct cracking noise, and the woman twitched before falling still. A couple seconds passed as Ivy sat there trying to breathe through the suffocating pain in her throat. The woman's limp body weighed her down and made it hard to get a foothold to stand up.

With some effort, she managed to push the woman off her and got up. Panting, Ivy held a hand over her throbbing throat and stared down at the now dead woman in disgust.

"Asshole," she spat.

After a moment's consideration, Ivy reached over to the door and flipped the lock in case anyone decided to walk in and find her standing over a dead body. Then she kneeled down and searched the woman's purse. In it she found a billfold packed to the seams.

"At least this wasn't a total waste of my time."

She searched the rest of the purse and came up with a card holder. There were old receipts, an S.S. Aqua ticket, and finally an ID card issued by Team Rocket.

"Eliza," she read. "Nice try."

Ivy pocketed the cash and the ID. Then she unlocked the door and checked outside. No one was coming, so she braced herself and hefted Eliza's body up under the shoulders to drag down the hall. There were rooms down this way, so Ivy found the nearest one and picked the lock. It was empty, and like the other first class cabins, this one had a balcony. Someone had left a Cleffa alone on the bed, and the small, pink Pokémon cowered in fear at Ivy's intrusion. She ignored it and set down Eliza's body to open up the balcony doors.

As soon as she stopped dragging the body, though, Cleffa made a high-pitched squeaking noise. Ivy whirled and found a man in a black suit advancing on her with a switchblade.

"Thunderbolt!"

A bright light flashed and something hissed and popped. The man jolted unnaturally and stumbled to the ground. Blood leaked from his mouth, and his head was smoking. Behind him, Lily stood in the doorway behind Pikachu. The yellow rodent's fur was standing on end and sparking with static electricity.

"Lily?" Ivy went to the door and took the girl's hand.

Lily was staring in shock at the man lying unmoving on the floor. His back was smoking where Pikachu's Thunderbolt had hit him.

"Lily, hey." Ivy took her by the shoulders and caught her eye. "Look at

me."

Lily looked up, wide-eyed. "H-He had a knife. He was... He was gonna —"

"I know. You saved my life." Ivy searched her eyes, willing her to understand. "Lily, you saved my life just now. He was gonna kill me, just like his partner tried to."

Lily's gaze shifted to the woman lying in an unceremonious heap on the floor near the dead man. She swallowed.

"Why... Who are they?"

"I'll explain later. Can you watch the hall and make sure no one comes this way?"

Lily's hands were trembling. "H-He was gonna kill you..."

Pikachu growled at the dead bodies on the floor. The poor Cleffa on the bed continued to cower under the large pillows in fear. Ivy threw open the balcony doors and dragged Eliza to the edge. It took her a minute to heft the woman up over her shoulder, but when she did it was a smooth drop to the ocean below. Eliza hit the water with a loud smack and was carried away in the undertow. Then, Ivy turned back to the man and checked his pockets. Like his partner, he was also carrying a hefty sum of cash and a Team Rocket ID card. Ivy pocketed both and picked him up under the shoulders to drag to the edge.

Lily grabbed his legs and lifted them up, much to Ivy's surprise. But the blonde girl didn't look at her and merely struggled to get the guy over the edge. Together, they let him fall into the water below where a school of Tentacruel and Tentacool were now waiting, drawn by Eliza's body. Ivy and Lily watched as the carnivorous jellyfish pulled the man's body underwater and tore at it with their poisoned tentacles and sharp beaks. Tentacruel's bulbous, red, false eyes glittered under the moonlight in the black water. In only a matter of minutes, they disappeared underwater once more. There was no trace of either Eliza or her partner.

Lily was staring over the edge in silence. Ivy grabbed her wrist and dragged her out of the room. "We can't stay here."

Lily didn't put up a fight as Ivy dragged her back to the dining room. Pikachu clung to Lily's shirt as they crossed the wide room. No one paid them much attention and they kept their heads down. From

there, it was a short trip back to Lily's cabin, where Ivy locked the door behind them.

She stared at the metal door for a few breaths, and her hands shook.

Now what?

"Those people," Lily said softly.

Ivy turned to face her, afraid of what she might see.

"They were trying to kill you," Lily went on.

Ivy swallowed and winced at the searing pain in her windpipe where Eliza had smacked her. "Yeah. If you and ChuChu hadn't shown up, I'd be Tentacruel's dinner instead of him."

Lily stared at the floor as she tried to process what that meant. "I just... You were gone a while, and I had to use the bathroom, too, so I just... But that man, he went into the women's room like he was looking for someone, and I followed him. ChuChu's always there with me, you know? I didn't wanna follow him alone, so I let her out." Lily laughed a nervously. "We do everything together, ChuChu and me, I mean." There was a pause as she tried to remember where she was in her explanation. "When I saw him pull the knife, I..." Lily sucked in a shaky breath. There were tears in her eyes, but they didn't fall. "He was gonna hurt you, and I *couldn't* just stand there and do nothing!"

Ivy closed the distance between them and embraced her. Lily threw her arms around the taller girl and began to tremble. She sobbed into Ivy's shirt.

"I didn't know what else to do," she said. "I didn't know what to do."

Ivy held her close as her mind raced. *What can I tell this poor girl?* Since their time with the Masked Man, she and Marco had always known, perhaps instinctively, that this was a secret they would have to take to their graves. It was no one's burden to bear but their own. But now Lily had stumbled onto something so ugly, so twisted and terrible, and Ivy didn't know what to do. She didn't deserve this.

If only I hadn't given her back her ticket.

Lily pulled back and looked up. Her eyes were wide and fearful. "What now?"

I don't know.

But she did know. There was really only one thing she could do at this point if she didn't want to lose Lily or worse, put her at risk unprepared and ignorant. Ivy took a deep breath and led Lily to the couch. Umbreon sat up on the bed, and Pikachu jumped up onto the couch to be with her trainer.

"What I'm about to tell you, I haven't told anyone else. Nothing I can say can make up for the trauma you're going through right now, but... Well, I hope it can justify it, just a little."

Lily listened, expectant, as she wiped her eyes and sat up straight.

"What do you know about Team Rocket?"

On the afternoon of the fifth day at sea, the S.S. Aqua docked at Cinnabar Island. Since it was the final stop on the cruiser's voyage, all passengers disembarked while prospective seafarers awaited their turn to board for the long journey back to Olivine City in Johto. Ivy hefted her pack over her shoulder and followed the line of people down the stairs to the salt-stained docks below. Waves lapped at the shore, and there was a faint smell of burning in the air. Cinnabar was a volcanic island, and Mt. Cinnabar loomed high in the sky to the north. The volcano had been dormant for decades, but every once in awhile the locals observed smoke rising from its gaping mouth and ash rained down like grey snow, a reminder of the true ruler of this island community.

"Hey, I have to drop off my bags, but once that's done I'll show you where the Pokémon Center is." Lily smiled over her shoulder as she walked along the dock toward the harbor. "We should get Batty taken care of ASAP."

The border patrol checked everyone's trainer IDs and passports, and they even randomly searched several passengers' luggage and examined their Pokémon. Even though the war was technically over, Cinnabar had not forgotten and probably would never forgive. Once they made it through security, Ivy followed Lily through the harbor, where they passed by privately-owned fishing boats, yachts, and other sea vessels all moored side by side. Flags of all sizes and colors topped their masts and fluttered in the wind. People were coming and going for leisure and for work, their laughter filling the air. Above, the sun shone bright and hot on this clear day, and Ivy was starting to sweat.

She watched Lily's blonde ponytail bob happily back and forth as they walked. Pikachu was perched on her shoulder and smelling the salty air, perhaps detecting the scent of filleted Magikarp at one of the seaside restaurants.

For someone as cheerful and ostensibly innocent as Lily, she'd handled the truth as well as could be expected. Ivy told her about her former affiliation with Team Rocket, about Marco, about their plans to escape and use their inside knowledge to bring down the organization before it could solidify its international reach in Kanto. She told Lily about Chimera and the truth about why Golbat was in such bad shape, and by the end of it she found herself afraid to look Lily in the eye.

"*I'm not proud of what I've done,"* she'd admitted. *"But if I hadn't done it, I wouldn't be here now with a way to put a stop to it."*

Lily listened to the tale and didn't once interrupt with a barrage of questions, like Ivy had expected she would do. By the end of it, Lily just sat there in silence for a long while, thinking. Ivy didn't want to involve her in something that had nothing to do with her. No one had to know what Lily had done, even if it was in defense of a friend's life. What was done was done. Ivy remembered the first time she'd taken a human life, and while there were many others that followed, that first one never did fade away.

"*You asked me why I would help you,"* Lily had said finally. *"Because I can. I helped you because I can. That hasn't changed, and it's not gonna."*

"Thank you, Lily."

They dropped off Lily's luggage at her apartment, and after that it was a short, ten-minute walk into town to get to the Pokémon Center. Palm trees lined the streets and their wide, flat leaves caught the sunbeams like bowls holding liquid gold. It was warm but not scorchingly hot, and the lull of the ocean filled the place with a pleasant languor that muted the senses and alleviated stress. To the north closer to Mt. Cinnabar's base, there were low booming sounds that indicated some kind of military training, according to Lily. Blaine liked to keep the Fire Brigades in top form in case of attack. Trainers in uniform riding Ponyta paced up and down the roads and kept an eye on anyone who passed. The horses were tall and, if Ivy was being honest, a little intimidating with their fiery manes and pupil-less, black eyes. Despite the urge to slip into lassitude just being outside, there was an electric current in the air abuzz with anticipation, like any moment the sky could turn grey and the sea would swallow up

the small island whole. A part of her wondered if the Ponyta on patrol could sense it, too.

At the Pokémon Center, Ivy dropped off Golbat and watched as the doctors prepped it for surgery with a local anaesthetic. Nurse Joy informed her it would be a couple days, since they would want to keep Golbat overnight to monitor its condition, but she assured her that Golbat would get the best treatment the doctors could afford. On the stretcher that would take it back to the OR, Golbat was trying to thrash. Ivy helped the doctors and nurses hold it down while the sedative took effect.

"You're okay, Batty," she said. "You're safe now, I promise."

Golbat's remaining eye was wide and fearful as it stared back at Ivy. She watched as it drooped and Golbat lost the battle against the drugs that numbed its body. She petted one of its large, fleshy ears as it dozed off until the doctors told her she had to leave so they could operate. With no choice, Ivy and Lily left the Pokémon Center and headed back outside.

"He'll be okay," Lily said. "You'll see."

"Yeah, I hope so."

Despite the beachy atmosphere and the temptation to lounge around soaking up the sun, Ivy couldn't find the motivation to enjoy Cinnabar with Golbat's condition so uncertain. Lily had to check in at the lab, and while she was gone Ivy curled up in bed, exhausted. She thought about Marco and wondered what he was doing now. Had he made it to Violet City? Even though they'd started this with every intention of going it alone, she couldn't help but wish he wasn't fighting by himself out there. She had Lily, however temporary their companionship was once she left Cinnabar, but Marco was a natural loner and would never compromise a mission for the sake of social company.

A day passed, and there was still no word from the Pokémon Center about Golbat. Lily, noticing Ivy's slump, invited her to come check out the lab for the day.

"It'll cheer you up," she insisted.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm not as enthusiastic about fossils as you are."

"Oh please, everyone loves science! It's the answer to all life's

mysteries! Come on, just say yes already."

Without much choice, Ivy promised to visit in the afternoon. The lab was one of the larger structures in downtown Cinnabar. The Gym lay just north of it, a huge, storied building guarded by uniformed military officers patrolling with trained Growlithe.

Inside, the lab was pristine in its white tiling, high ceilings, and fluorescent lighting. The receptionist marked her name on the guest list, and Ivy followed her directions toward the Genetics Department. The hallways were long, and she passed by glass doors that led to different divisions within the lab. People in lab coats and Pokémon occupied the various rooms conducting who knew what kinds of experiments and research. Ivy didn't pay them much attention as she counted the door numbers until she arrived at the right one toward the end of the hall.

A middle-aged man in a lab coat was exiting just as she was entering, and he held the door open for her. Ivy wandered around the corner and came upon a room filled with large machines that looked a bit like water heaters. They were humming like generators. Curious, she walked toward the nearest one and inspected it more closely. It had a thick, metal pipe that extended from the top and ran along the juncture between wall and ceiling. Ivy followed it with her eyes until it dropped down toward a long table set up against the back wall. The other generators all had identical piping that ran along the ceiling and dropped down side by side over the table, which was encased in glass. Inside the glass lay strange, oblong objects of various sizes and colors. Curious, Ivy went to get a closer look.

"Pokémon eggs?"

Some were the size of her fist, while the largest was at least as thick around as her head. Some were blue and carved with ripples in their shells, while others were smooth and the color of mud. The largest of the eggs caught her particular interest. Their shells were rough and uneven, reminiscent of scales. There were five of them, all roughly the same size, and they were huddled together under one of the thick generator pipes.

Ivy looked over her shoulder at the doors on either side of the room, but there was no one around. She turned back to the eggs and bit her lip.

It's not like anyone would miss just one.

Convinced, she slung her pack off her shoulder and picked one of the scaly eggs from the bunch.

"Whoa."

It was heavy, at least fifteen pounds, and the shell was even harder than it appeared. She hastily slipped it into her pack and zipped up the back. Then she moved the remaining eggs around a little so it didn't look like there was a hole.

"Hey, there you are!" Lily, dressed in a white lab coat over her usual brown and yellow outfit, entered the room from the far door with a bright smile. "What're you doing in the hatchery? This place gives me the creeps."

"Oh, I...thought you worked here? And what's creepy about eggs?" Ivy hoisted her now considerably heavier backpack over her shoulder.

Lily made a face. "No way. Eggs just sit around all day doing nothing, and with all the added complexities of cloning extinct Pokémon, our hatch rate's only about thirty percent. Where's the fun in that? I work in here, c'mon."

She grabbed Ivy's hand and dragged her deeper into the lab.

"*This* is where I work."

The room was white-tiled and painted like the rest of the lab, but here there were machines with moving parts. Powerful microscopes moved of their own accord examining slides with matter too small for the human eye to detect. Robotic arms handled fossils, old amber samples, and other presumably prehistoric material. A wide computer was alight with code that looked like nothing but a jumble of numbers and words too long and convoluted to pronounce.

"Charming," Ivy said, snatching a hunk of old amber from one of the mechanical arms and holding it up to the light.

"Whoa! Better put that down. There's valuable Pokémon DNA frozen in there."

Ivy smirked and held out the old amber for the arm, and it took the sample back. "Cool setup. I didn't even know this kind of tech existed."

"Blaine uses the Gym funds to ensure we have state-of-the-art equipment here. The lab's like Cinnabar's crown jewel, and he's really

interested in our work here."

"So all this belongs to the Gym."

Lily frowned. "I guess if you wanna get technical, then yeah. But it's my research, and it wouldn't be here without me."

Ivy approached one of the microscopes and squinted at the slide it was examining. When she looked through the lenses, the slide came alive with tiny cells teeming with life.

"It's incredible, Lily. Omanyte's proof enough of that."

"So why do I get the feeling you're not telling me something?"

Ivy sighed and crossed her arms. "Nothing, I just remembered something. I've seen what science can do with unlimited funding and resources, and even though you mean well, science is only as good as its operator. Or as bad."

"I believe science can make our lives better. I've dedicated my life to that belief."

"I know. But not everyone shares your belief."

"What're you trying to say?"

Ivy hesitated as she remembered the feeling of the seeing Lily standing behind Pikachu as the Rocket Agent fell over, electrocuted to death. "You said you helped me because you can. Let me return the favor. Beware of Team Rocket. Just like the two that attacked me, they don't always make themselves known. They hide in plain sight, and they're patient."

Lily's amber eyes were hard and unreadable. "Cinnabar doesn't associate with Team Rocket."

"That doesn't mean they're not here. I've seen what they can do. I used to be one of them. And believe me when I say that for every good thing you've done here, they're working on something just as life-changing, and not for the better. They're evil, and I want you to be careful. There's nowhere in the world that's safe from them. No matter what you think of me or what happens next, please believe that."

"Of course I believe you. But you're talking like I'm never gonna see you again. What's going on?"

"You asked me why I was coming to Kanto. I'm here to put a stop to Team Rocket, one way or another. I dunno if I'll succeed, or even if I'll survive it, but I have to try. No one else really has, and I have to start somewhere." She took Lily's hands in hers and held her gaze. "Just remember what I told you. Promise me that."

Lily nodded. "I-I promise. But you'll be okay. You and Batty and the rest of your Pokémon, too. And we'll see each other again. You promise *me* that."

Ivy smiled and swallowed the tight knot in her throat. "I'll try."

Lily pulled her into a hug and they embraced for a few moments. "We're friends now, so you're stuck with me. Okay? I'm not going anywhere."

Friends?

Ivy wasn't sure she really knew the meaning of the word.

"Thank you for everything," she said.

"You can thank me next time we see each other."

Ivy laughed. "Sounds good."

The journey to Pallet Town from Cinnabar was only two days and one night. Nurse Joy had assured Ivy that Golbat would recover with time and would be able to fly again, but there was of course nothing they could do about its missing eye. That was good enough, and Ivy was just glad the big bat would be back to normal after the horror Team Rocket had subjected it to.

When the ship she'd secured passage on docked outside of Pallet Town, Ivy disembarked and checked her map. The nearest Gym was north in Viridian City, which would take a few days to hike to. There was nothing of interest in Pallet Town that she knew of, so there was no reason to stop over.

The bay quickly gave way to tall grass and lazy, sloping hills that led out of Pallet Town down Route One. To the west, Ivy noted the same mountain chain she'd seen out her window outside Blackthorn City for many years, culminating in the sublime Mt. Silver that peaked higher than any of its surrounding companions. It was mid-afternoon, and the sun cast a warm glow over the quaint, country houses that made up

the sleepy Pallet Town. Maybe it was a nice place, but Ivy wouldn't know, and she didn't have time to know.

Once outside of Pallet Town, she was walking at a steady pace due north. For safety, she let Houndour out of his Pokéball to patrol ahead and alert her to any threats. The canine bounded ahead and sniffed at the tall grass, eager to be outside. It wasn't long before Houndour detected a disturbance worth checking out and went darting after it.

"Hey, wait up!"

Ivy ran to catch up with Houndour, and when she did she paled at what had caught its attention. A Raticate was attacking a young man who looked about her age, and he was trying to kick it away. A small Pokéball had rolled out of his reach, and he had no choice but to do his best to fend off the feral rodent alone. Ivy watched as it sank its thick teeth into the boy's calf and began to yank back, taking a chunk of his leg with it. Memories of another Raticate pummeling Larvitar returned to her, and fury bubbled up in her chest.

"Kill it," she ordered Houndour.

The black canine was all too eager to obey and rammed the Raticate, catching it by surprise and sinking its teeth in with a Fire Fang. Ivy focused on the rat's victim and helped him up.

"Hey, are you okay?"

He said something about Pallet Town, so she automatically turned back toward the small settlement. He wasn't particularly tall, and he wore a red cap that made him look more boyish than his true age, she suspected. But he had one of those faces that was naturally calming, even to someone who didn't like or trust anyone. There was a kindness in his eyes she couldn't deny.

When they made it back to the outskirts of the town, he was starting to pass out from bloodloss. It was then that another young man, also near their age, appeared and ran toward them.

"Ash!" he shouted.

Ivy dragged Ash as best she could. "Over here!"

I guess I'll be stopping in Pallet Town, after all.

The other boy was nearly upon them, and she struggled to keep a

passed-out Ash standing.

"I found him being attacked by a Raticate in the wilds," she explained.

The newcomer gave her a quick once-over before looping Ash's free arm over his shoulder. "The lab's just ahead, follow me. And thanks."

"Ivy," she said before he could ask.

"Ivy," he repeated. "I'm Gary. Gary Oak."

She caught his eye and held his gaze, and all she saw was endless green.

5. Mt Moon

Triumvirate, chapter 5: Mt. Moon
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Ash and Gary listened intently as Ivy told them her tale. It reminded Ash a bit of when he was younger and his mother would tell him colorful bedtime stories of fantastical things. Heroes and villains and monsters so terrifying they couldn't possibly be real, and in the end, the hero always won. But in Ivy's story, there were no heroes and the monsters were too powerful to defeat.

She told them about her abduction as a child by the Masked Man, how she'd met Marco, her only friend for most of her life. She talked about the training she'd received, why she'd been able to attack that Ariados in Viridian Forest and how she'd caught Brock in a grip that could have snapped his arm without even thinking about it. She recounted her time in Team Rocket, as a Grunt and as an Admin, and talked about Giovanni, what kind of man he was, his vision for Team Rocket and the future. They listened with rapt attention as she recounted the harrowing tale of Marco's and her escape down Route Forty-Five, their grisly discovery in Dark Cave, and later their vespertine meeting with Professor Elm. Finally, she told them about her trip to Kanto on the S.S. Aqua and how she'd met Lily, the brilliant scientist that saved her life.

"When I met you both, I'd just gotten to Pallet Town. I was determined to go it alone after what happened with Lily, but then the Snorlax attacked and, well, you know the rest."

"Wow," Ash said. "Just...wow. Where do I even start?" He thought for a moment. "So you were abducted by a huge bird when you were a kid and forced to live with this guy in the mask. Is that why you're afraid of birds? Damn, I thought it was just some random phobia. I had no idea there was a good reason behind it."

Gary sighed and finally faced them with his back to the window. By now, it was very late in the afternoon and the setting sun had dyed the sky a brilliant, burnt orange as Pewter's gothic architecture cast winding shadows like long fingers over the streets below.

"I wanna hear more about Chimera. That's what was wrong with the Snorlax that attacked Pallet Town, right? How does it work? How can Team Rocket mind control Pokémon? That seems like something out

of a sci-fi movie."

"You saw it with your own eyes," Ivy said. "The tech they have works. When Marco and I crashed the Dark Cave party, the Machamp we were fighting just kept coming. It ripped its own arm off and kept coming. That's not natural."

"And you think Team Rocket's trying to roll out this tech across Kanto and Johto."

"I dunno what their exact plan is. They're limited by the hardware, so it's not like they could push a button and suddenly control all Pokémon in the vicinity. But honestly? I'm more worried about the physical mutations. They're creating hybrids that are bigger, stronger, and faster than the originals. The ones Marco and I fought were incomplete, probably early prototypes." She curled her lip in disgust at the memory. "They were harvesting parts from different Pokémon, including Batty. I dunno what their progress looks like now or even what they're ultimately planning to do with the tech. I just know they have to be stopped."

"And you're gonna stop them," Gary said. "All by yourself."

Ash looked between the two of them as they faced off, and Gary's question hung in the air.

"If I have to, then yeah. But Brock already agreed to support the cause when the time comes. I just have to get the other seven Gym Leaders' support, and I won't be alone."

Gary chuckled, but it didn't sound friendly. "Right. What're you gonna do? Challenge all of them to fights? Brock was one thing, but I wasn't making it up when I said that's not how things work. You really could get arrested or worse. And then what? You're gonna stop Team Rocket from inside a jail cell? You haven't thought this through."

Ivy narrowed her eyes. "It's all I've thought about for years. Marco and I—"

"—Your friend Marco isn't here," Gary interrupted. "You've never been to Kanto before. You don't even know who the other Gym Leaders are or what kinds of Pokémon they specialize in. You don't know Kanto Gym politics, or the history between them. For example, did you know Celadon and Saffron have a long-standing dispute? Their Gym Leaders don't get along, and it's caused a lot of problems for people trying to go between the cities. They've shut down thru traffic several times in

the past, and I suspect things're only gonna get worse. What're you gonna do about that? How will you make Sabrina and Erika work together? 'Cause trust me, they won't want to."

Ivy remained silent and kept her expression carefully schooled, but Ash noticed how her knuckles were white as she clenched her fists hard enough to hurt.

"That's what I thought," Gary said dismissively.

Ivy got up and got in his face. "What do you want me to say, huh? No, I've never been here and no, I don't know much about internal Kanto politics. You got me there, happy? But it doesn't change the fact that Team Rocket *has* to be stopped. I'm not exaggerating when I say they're hell bent on world domination. That's exactly the kind of self-involved megalomania Giovanni feeds the masses, and they eat it up. He's never gonna stop, and soon, it'll be too late for everyone. So maybe I don't know everything I need to know, but I do know I'm the only one here who seems to feel the urgency of the situation. If I do nothing, we'll all be dead."

"What if you didn't have to do it alone?" Ash asked.

Both Ivy and Gary turned to him like they'd forgotten he was even there. Pikachu had taken up a position in Ash's lap, but its ears twitched and followed the conversation.

"Ash," Gary warned.

"Ivy's the reason my mom and the other people in Pallet Town'll get the help they need. As far as I'm concerned, I owe her big time for that. If this is all true, then it means that Snorlax attack could happen again, maybe in a bigger city where more people could get hurt, or maybe on a much bigger scale. I dunno about you, Gary, but it's not like I can just sit here and pretend I'm not involved."

Gary gaped at him. "You can't be serious. You wanna *help* her?"

"Ash, I appreciate the gesture, but you heard my story. You heard what happened to Lily when she got involved. I don't want that for you guys."

Ash picked up Pikachu and stood up. His expression was hard and implacable, and the orange light from the setting sun made his red eyes glow with the determination of someone far older and seasoned. "No offense, but you involved us the minute Professor Oak roped you

into traveling with us. At this point, it's not your call whether we decide to help you or not. Our mission was to get help for Pallet Town, which we did, and to fill out the Pokédex. To do that, Gary and I have to travel all over the continent, so we're all goin' to the same places, anyway. And from what we've already been through, it's obvious that we'd be dead if we were each going it alone."

"Ash, can I talk to you in private?" Gary said.

"No. I've already made up my mind, and there's really nothing you can say to change it." He smirked. "'Sides, how can I say no to the chance to save the world?"

Gary gritted his teeth and snarled. "You idiot. This is a suicide mission. No matter how you look at it, the three of us wouldn't stand a chance against an international crime syndicate like Team Rocket. They've got men, they've got money, and they've apparently got the ability to turn Pokémon into mutant mind slaves."

"Yeah, well, Ivy's right. If we don't do something, who will? You saw Brock, how he was just sitting on his hands doing nothing 'cause he didn't know *what* to do. It wasn't until Ivy explained everything that he realized he had to act, *do something* to save the city. So maybe Team Rocket's big and they got a lotta cool shit, but they dunno we're coming. And by the time they figure it out, we'll have the Gym Leaders on our side to squeeze 'em."

"Ash..." Ivy said, shocked.

"That's even assuming the Gym Leaders'll wanna help!" Gary said. "God, there are so many unknowns and what-ifs, don't you get that? This is so unorganized and so half-cocked."

"Then I guess we'll need a guy to strategize and plan things out," Ash said. "Someone who knows how to read the political situation, who's been to a lot of these places. You know?"

"No way. You're not dragging me into this shit."

"Aw, c'mon. You said yourself you know more about what's happening in Kanto than Ivy."

"Yeah, 'cause she's not *from here*. It's not like I'm an expert."

"But you know a lot," Ivy said. "I would never have known about the Celadon-Saffron dispute until I stumbled right into it."

"Oh, so now you *want* to involve us? What happened to going it alone?"

Ivy bit her lip. "I'm not exactly an idiot, in case you haven't noticed. I'd be Ariados chow right now if it wasn't for you guys. Before, I always had Marco to watch my back, but he's not here anymore."

Gary glared at her and said very softly, "You're a murderer."

Silence befell the trio as the issue they had all been avoiding since Ivy recounted her tale sank in, unable to be ignored any longer.

"That's right," Ivy said finally. "I've killed people. I've done it for Team Rocket and most recently to save myself. I can't erase that part of me, and I'll have to live with it for the rest of my life. Nothing I do will ever make that right, but stopping Team Rocket? I think that'll at least be a start. I think I owe that to all the people who've become their victims. My victims."

Another silence stretched between them, and when it became apparent that Gary had nothing further to say on the matter, Ivy excused herself.

"I'm planning on leaving as soon as my Pokémon are ready to go. Whatever you decide... Well, either way, I'm glad I met you. Both of you. And I'm sorry for dragging you into this."

She left, and Ash just stared at the door for a few moments.

"So, that's it?" Ash said. "You're just gonna let her leave by herself?"

Gary sighed and sat down on the bed. "She's a grown woman. She can make her own decisions, clearly."

"Cut the crap. If she tries to get through Mt. Moon alone, she'll probably never make it. That place is a pitch black maze. Even Professor Oak never took you there."

"Not my problem."

"What about me? Am I your problem?"

"Ash—"

"I'm going with her. She can't do this alone, I don't care what she says. And you know what? I wanna help her. If Team Rocket's responsible for what happened in Pallet Town, then I want them gone, every last

one of 'em. I'll kill them with my bare hands for what they did to our home."

"Stop it. Murder isn't something you can just brush off, so don't act like it is. Doesn't matter if it's an enemy, it's still a person's blood on your hands."

"This is a dangerous world. You probably know that better than anybody. If it's down to them of us, I choose us. I choose my mom and the rest of the people who ended up as collateral in Team Rocket's attack. Fuck them. They can't get away with this—"

"It's not that simple!" Gary got up and bared his teeth in a snarl. "This isn't like when your Pidgeotto died and we just couldn't do anything about it, this is *people* we're talking about."

"Yeah, bad people."

Gary went to the window again and showed Ash his back.

"Listen, I get what you're saying. It's not like I'm ready to go out there and start slaying Team Rocket Grunts. But what if it gets to a point where you don't have a choice? What if it's you or them? I'm not trying to excuse what Ivy did or whatever, but don't you think we can cut her a little slack? I mean, she was fucking brainwashed as a kid and obviously went through some messed up shit. I dunno if it's fair to put all the blame on her for that."

"Of course it's not," Gary allowed. "That's not what I'm saying. But the act itself isn't something you can just dismiss. I dunno if I can trust someone like that."

Ash sighed. "You know what? I'm gonna take a walk and grab food. She gave us til when her Pokémon're healed to decide, so you better make up your mind fast."

"What happened to 'she can't do this alone'?"

"Yeah, well, you can't do this alone, either. We stick together like we promised Professor Oak. In the end... If you still don't want to help her, then fine. But you better come up with a damn good reason, 'cause so far you got nothing as far's I'm concerned."

Ash left with Pikachu, and Gary remained at the window. He had no appetite, and his shoulders felt heavy with the weight of today's revelations.

"How the hell did it come to this?"

There was no answer as he stood there alone in the waning, afternoon sun, watching as shadows swallowed the city below.

By the next morning, Ivy had received a note under her door that Houndour, Umbreon, and Golbat were ready to be picked up from the clinic downstairs. She hadn't heard anything from Ash and Gary the rest of the previous evening and night, and knowing how Gary was an early riser, the fact that she hadn't heard anything this morning didn't spell good news.

She caught herself with that thought and frowned. *I didn't want to involve them in the first place.*

But the old mantra had worn thin on her ears. Alone in her room, she found herself wishing she wasn't. Things had been almost fun with them around despite the gravity of her situation. And their assistance in the Viridian Forest had been invaluable. She had no idea what dangers lay ahead, nor how she would scale them on her own. But she couldn't force them into anything, no matter how much it stung to think that this was probably the end of their journey.

Steeling herself, she gathered up her pack and headed downstairs. Nurse Joy was waiting with three Pokéballs to return to Ivy.

"It would be best if you could let them take it easy for the next couple of days, but otherwise, your Pokémon are as good as new."

"Thanks a lot. How much do I owe you?"

Ivy paid for the services and grimaced at her dwindling supply of cash. She'd planned on looking into getting some body armor or at least some warmer clothing for the journey ahead, but now that option seemed a like a distant hope. Feeling a little better with her team back on her belt, she turned to leave. Another scan of the lobby revealed no familiar faces, and her eyes fell.

"I guess it was too much."

"What was?"

Ivy whirled and found Gary standing directly behind her. Behind him were the stairs to the PokéMart, and he had a large grocery bag in his hand.

"Gary," she blurted out. "Um, morning. I didn't think I'd see you around today."

"That makes two of us."

He grabbed her by the elbow and led her to a cluster of sofas surrounding a coffee table in a corner of the Pokémon Center where they wouldn't be overheard. She set down her pack on a sofa.

"I have a condition," he said. "From here on out, there'll be no secrets between the three of us, no exceptions. No more need-to-know bullshit. You're gonna tell us everything you know and everything you think you know."

Ivy nearly lost her balance as she processed what he was saying. "Are... Are you saying you wanna help me?"

Gary set down the grocery bag on the table and put his hands in his pockets. "It's not like I'm such a douchebag that I'd let Team Rocket off the hook after everything they've done. Daisy got hurt in that attack, and a lot of people I've known all my life died."

Ivy didn't know what to say. Five minutes ago, she was ready to part ways and continue on alone despite the slim odds in her favor of surviving whatever awaited in the wilds beyond Pewter. She could've laughed.

"Thank you," she said, meaning it. "And you were right, I didn't think this through as much as I should have."

"Obviously. But with the three of us, we might stand a chance of not fucking everything up."

She did laugh this time, and Gary looked visibly uncomfortable at her reaction.

"What?"

Ivy smiled. "You have a bit of a hero complex, don't you?"

Gary narrowed his eyes. "What's that s'posed to mean?"

"I think you like the idea of saving the day, even if it means putting up with me for a little longer."

"Hey, guys!" Ash spotted them as he was coming downstairs from the room and waved. "Ivy, don't leave yet 'cause we're coming with you!"

Gary scowled. "Annoying woman."

Ivy didn't hear him. "I heard. And despite what I said yesterday, I really am glad you guys'll have my back out there. It's dangerous to travel alone."

"We'll have each other's backs," Ash said with a grin. "Oh, by the way, I call the next Gym Leader."

"Huh?"

Gary sighed like he was already so done with how today was turning out despite the early morning hour. "It doesn't *work* that way. How many times do I have to tell you guys?"

"Well, that's fine with me," Ivy said, ignoring him. "It'd be good to typecast the Gym Leaders so we have the advantage in case we end up having to fight more of them."

"Yeah, I was thinkin' the same thing," Ash said, plopping down on the sofa next to Ivy's pack.

The dip he made caused her pack to topple over, and the Pokémon egg Ivy had been schlepping around rolled out and onto Ash's lap.

"Ow! What the—"

Ivy paled. "Careful!"

Ash maneuvered the egg into a more comfortable position on his lap. "Man, that's gonna leave some bruises. What the hell is this? A boulder?"

"Is that a Pokémon egg?" Gary said, suddenly very interested. "I've never seen one this big before."

He began examining it, and Ivy checked behind her shoulder to make sure no one was watching them. There were no other people in the lobby this early in the morning, and Nurse Joy had disappeared around back.

"Yeah," she said.

"Dude, this thing is *heavy*," Ash said. "Here."

He rolled the egg off his lap and Gary had no choice but to catch it. He faltered, but regained his balance and stood up with it cradled in

his arms.

"Unbelievable," Gary said, awed. "I've never seen an egg like this before. What kind of Pokémon is it? Where'd you get it?"

"Why're you so interested?"

"Remember what I said about secrets?"

Ivy crossed her arms. "Fine, whatever. If you really wanna know, I got it in Cinnabar. No idea what's in it, but I swiped it from the genetics lab, so it's not like I could just go around asking."

"You *stole* this?"

"What? It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Ooh, that's probably not a good idea. Like, ever," Ash said.

"Well, it's not like I can return it now," Ivy protested. "Besides, I'm kinda curious about what's in it."

She reached for the egg, but Gary moved out of her reach and cradled it close. "No way. I'm taking this. Consider it part of the deal for us sticking together."

Ivy gaped. "What? No way! That's mine!"

"You *stole* it, so technically, it was never yours."

"That doesn't make it *yours*!"

"It does now. Besides, since you stole it from a lab, it's only right that whatever hatches should grow under a scientist's care to make up for the life you've deprived it of."

"You're not a scientist!"

"I'm closer than either of you!"

"That doesn't even make any sense!"

Ash got up and stood between them before someone got the idea to start throwing punches. "Okay, simmer down, you two. Ivy, he's not gonna let this go. And honestly? It's just an egg. Who cares? You can catch better Pokémon at Mt. Moon."

"You're taking *his* side?"

Ash blushed. "What? No, it's not like that. There's no sides!"

"Is this, like, some weird sexist revenge for all those times I didn't tell you guys the truth? I thought we were moving past that."

Ash put up his hands in defense. "No way! Aw, c'mon, you know it's not like that."

"Just because Ash is taking my side doesn't make it sexist. It just means he knows I'm right," Gary said.

"So you *are* ganging up on me."

Ash hung his head in his hands. "Goddamnit."

"Let's get moving. I got us supplies for the hike through Mt. Moon, but we're gonna need better clothes. The caves get pretty cold."

Gary grabbed his grocery bag and headed for the door.

"Hey! What about my egg!" Ivy grabbed her pack and chased after him.

Alone now in the Pokémon Center, Ash begrudgingly hefted his pack over his shoulder and looked down at Pikachu. The yellow rodent squeaked up at him.

"I know, buddy. Looks like I'm gonna be stuck in the middle of those two forever, huh?"

Pikachu climbed up his pant leg and settled on his shoulder. Ash grinned and scratched Pikachu's nose.

"Well, better hurry before they break that egg or somethin'."

Ash, Gary, and Ivy had made the rounds at the PokéMart and other stores around Pewter to stock up on food and supplies that would serve them well on the long hike through Mt. Moon to Cerulean City on the other side. Gary made a point of purchasing a few Great Balls in case they encountered any tough wild Pokémon in Mt. Moon. He also made Ivy and Ash carry most of the supplies to make room in his bag for the Pokémon egg that was now unofficially his. Ivy's more pressing concern appeared to be their dwindling funds.

"Where's Team Rocket when I need to swipe a few hundred bills?" she groused.

"Stop announcing that," Gary said. "Why do they have so much money on them, anyway?"

"Bribes, mostly. And last minute purchases for missions. You'd be surprised at how frugally they live despite the wads of cash they tote around."

"I guess you'd know."

Ash walked along in front of them with Pikachu, hands behind his head as he breathed in the crisp, morning air. It was still pretty early, and they were leisurely walking to the gate on the city's east end to get to Route Three and then on to Mt. Moon.

"Hey!"

Up ahead, Ash caught sight of Brock jogging toward the trio and waved.

"Hey, Brock," he said. "What're you doing outta the Gym?"

"On my way to look for you guys, actually. I wanted to let you know I got word back from my guys in Pallet Town."

Gary stepped forward. "What happened?"

"Nothing to worry about. They're just going to airlift some people out here for treatment at the hospital since things are still pretty wrecked down there. Anyway, one of the people they're bringing was Delia Ketchum, so I thought you'd wanna know, Ash."

"That's my mom. Is she okay?"

"From what the note said, everyone's stable for now, but they're going to need some professional care."

Ash slumped in relief. "Good."

Brock put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, she and the others'll be safe here. We've got a pretty good hospital."

"Thanks, man."

Brock noticed they were all carrying their packs. "You guys leaving

already?"

Ivy nodded. "Yeah, we're heading to Cerulean City next."

"So that means you have to get through Route Three and Mt. Moon." Brock brought a hand to his chin and thought for a moment. "Are you going dressed like that? 'Cause I wouldn't recommend it."

"I don't think we have a choice. We don't have a whole lotta cash left, and food seemed like a bigger priority."

"Everything's been pretty expensive," Gary said.

Brock sighed. "Tell me about it. Hey, actually, I might be able to help you guys out. Come to the Gym for a minute."

They followed Brock back to the Gym, and he led them to a locker room in the back. The closets and drawers were filled with military-grade stab vests, greaves, and other armor pieces. Ivy immediately started touching everything.

"Oh my god, is this the new Brigandine model stab vest?" She ran her hands over a stitched, black vest on a hanger. "These things are the highest quality on the market right now."

Brock grinned. "Being a Gym Leader has its perks. We have to protect our jurisdictions from feral Pokémon and bandits, so on top of the Gym tax, we get a defense stipend from Indigo Plateau. In the past, it all went to building the wall around the city, but that's been done for a couple years now, so I ordered these babies." He selected a vest and greaves from the rack and held it up to Ash. "Looks like they're your size."

"Seriously? You're just gonna let us have them?" Ash took the hanger and held up the armor to size up against himself.

"Sure. It's not like I get a whole lot of use outta them these days. I've got enough for me and some of the veteran trainers that help out when there's a problem, and my siblings are mostly too young to fit into these. They don't make kid sizes."

Ivy was already pulling off her jacket to slip the fitted stab vest over her shirt. "Damn, it's so light!"

Brock chuckled. "It's the best, after all. If you guys're heading into Mt. Moon, you'll need all the protection you can get. The Zubat in there

are one thing, but you don't want to fall in the dark and crack a rib or something."

Gary inspected the armor. "Just how much can these take?"

"They can deflect a Scyther slash, to give you an idea."

"Ooh!" Ivy noticed the under-armor long sleeved shirts on the next rack and thumbed through them until she found her size in dark green. "How about these, Brock?"

"Yeah, go ahead. Those aren't as strong as the Brigadines, but they'll save you from Zubat bites and poison splatters."

Ivy was almost giddy as she pulled a shirt on over her tank top and fastened the vest over it.

"Thanks a lot," Gary said once he'd picked out his size in everything. "We really owe you one."

"Don't worry about it. Just make sure you keep your end of the bargain with Team Rocket."

"We will," Ash said.

Once they were all changed, Brock walked them out of the Gym to see them off. He asked for their map, and Gary produced it.

"Listen," he said, pointing to the map. "You'll wanna stick to the marked tunnels. I worked a lot with the Cerulean Gym to clear a path between the two cities, and that'll be your safest bet. Mt. Moon's a maze and it's easy to get lost. Just stick to the marked path and you shouldn't have any problems."

"Got it." Gary returned the map to his jacket pocket.

They said their goodbyes, and soon the trio was headed out the eastern gate toward Route Three. The trail was mostly flat for the first couple miles, but as they started getting into the mountains, the incline rose steadily and the path became less of a path and more of a tortuous animal trail that wove between clustered boulders and shrubbery. There were patches of tall grass and trees where Pidgey, Spearow, and Rattata made their nests, but none of them bothered the trio with Pikachu and Growlithe on patrol. As the sun traversed the afternoon sky, the trio made good time hiking. Ash stopped around seven to look back at Pewter.

"Whoa," he said. "We must be a few hundred feet up. It looks so small."

The grey city sat solemn and small in the distance below them to the west. Farther east, Mt. Moon and the lesser peaks surrounding it still loomed a couple days' hiking away. The sky was orange with the setting sun, and Gary slipped his pack off.

"Let's stop here for the night before it gets too dark."

Everyone agreed, and they got to work making camp for the night. Gary and Growlithe got a fire going, while Ivy unpacked some of the food they'd brought to have for dinner. Ash and Pikachu took a walk around the area to make sure there weren't any wild Pokémon nesting nearby that might have reason to wander into their camp and start a fight. By the time the sun had set, the trio was gathered around the fire for dinner and their Pokémon had all wandered off to find their own meals.

"So, when d'you think that thing's gonna hatch?" Ash asked through a bite of jerky.

Gary had the scaly Pokémon egg out near the fire. The flames danced upon its rough-hewn shell, casting ghostly shadows. He put a hand on it.

"Dunno. But I thought I felt something moving around inside earlier, so maybe soon."

"It's been like that for a while now. I'd guess any day now," Ivy said.

Ash grinned. "Well, I can't wait to see what's in it. It's gotta be something pretty awesome, like a Rhyhorn or something."

Ivy snorted. "Watch it turn out to be something totally lame."

"Aw, no way. That egg's pretty ridiculous by itself. Hey, maybe it's a Kangaskhan?"

"Definitely not," Gary said, pensive. "Like I said, I've never seen a Pokémon egg like this before. Besides, Kangaskhan're mammals, so they don't lay eggs."

"Oh, right. I knew that."

Wartortle had apparently given up on eating anything more and plopped down next to Ash before curling up and retreating into its

large shell to sleep. Ash patted Wartortle's back absentmindedly.

"Hey, where's Munchlax?" Ivy asked.

"Dunno. He looked like he was going to town on those berries a little bit ago, but it looks like he ate all of 'em."

"He'll be back once he's eaten his weight in food and can't move anymore," Gary said. The undertone of disdain was not lost on his companions.

"You know, one day I bet Munchlax is gonna save your life or something," Ash said. "Then you'll regret being such a Negative Nancy about him."

"I *highly* doubt that."

"Well, I think I'm gonna turn in, boys." Ivy got up and stretched. "We should get an early start tomorrow if we wanna make good time."

Ash yawned. "Yeah, that sounds good."

They called it a night while Umbreon and Houndour kept watch since they were the most accustomed to seeing in the dark. Gary's Eevee made a valiant effort to stay awake and had plopped itself down next to Umbreon, but soon it grew drowsy and couldn't keep its eyes open.

The night passed without incident, and soon Ash awoke to the sounds of Gary and Ivy packing up the camp. Gary tossed him a breakfast bar to chew on, and they were back on the road within the next half hour. Slowly, the terrain began to change little by little the farther and higher they climbed. After lunch, Pewter was no bigger than a thumbnail miles behind them, and the trees grew more and more sparse as the dirt underfoot turned to hard stone and shale. A couple hours after they breaked for lunch, Gary shrugged off his pack suddenly like it had burned him. Growlithe began to growl in warning at the pack.

"What's wrong?" Ash was at his side in an instant and Pikachu's red cheeks crackled with static electricity in anticipation of a threat.

"I felt something pop." Gary hastily unzipped his pack to reveal the Pokémon egg. There was a small hole in the top where something had broken the tough shell.

"Hey, it's hatching!" Ivy said.

The trio, Pikachu, and Growlithe huddled around the egg and watched with bated breath as something struggled from inside to break through the shell.

"Damn," Ivy said. "You know, Lily told me these eggs only had about a thirty percent hatch rate. Guess I picked a good one, huh?"

"You mean you *stole* a good one," Gary corrected her.

"Potato, tomato."

"That's definitely *not* the way that saying goes."

"Shh! Guys, it's happening!" Ash said.

They watched as what looked like a grey snout tried to poke through the growing hole in the egg. It drew back and pecked at the shell from the inside to chip away more of the hard surface. Silence fell as more and more of the baby Pokémon's body was revealed. Sharp talons drew cracks in the egg and shaved off more of the tough outer layer, while a beak-like snout struggled to open and revealed rows of tiny, razor-sharp teeth.

"What *is* that thing?" Ivy said.

Ash reached for a broken piece of eggshell that had stuck to the Pokémon's head. "I dunno. It's kinda like a bird? Or some kind of reptile?"

The little Pokémon—which turned out to be not so little—finally managed to shatter the rest of the eggshell and tumbled out onto the ground. Its hide was grey and scaly, much like the egg that had housed it up until now, and it had a lash-like tail that made its body length from the tip of its nose to the end of its tail about as long as Gary's spread arms. It sneezed, disoriented as it tried to learn how to breath, and opened almond-shaped, black eyes that shifted between the trio's faces. With a little squawk, it tried stretching its leathery wings and ended up on all fours.

"Holy shit," Gary said. "That's... It's an Aerodactyl."

As though recognizing its name, Aerodactyl squawked again and crawled toward Gary. He held out a hand for it to smell.

"An air of what?" Ivy said.

Ash got an idea and rummaged around his pack nearby for a strip of jerky.

"Hey Gary, try this." He handed the food over.

Gary held out the strip of dried meat for Aerodactyl to smell. Its eyes narrowed at the scent of cooked flesh, and it curled back its upper lip and snapped the jerky right out of Gary's hand. It then proceeded to tear into it, using the claws on its wing joints for leverage.

"Aerodactyl," Gary repeated. "But this isn't possible. They're s'posed to be extinct. I even saw an old fossilized skull back at the Pewter Museum of Science. These guys haven't been around for millions of years."

"Oh," Ivy said. "Well, Lily did figure out how to revive and clone Omanyte, so I guess she did the same with Aerodactyl?"

"Lily sounds like a badass super nerd," Ash said. "That's pretty awesome."

Aerodactyl finished its meal and once more approached Gary. He held out his hands to show that he didn't have anything else to give it, but Aerodactyl must have taken the message the wrong way because it climbed up his left arm and crawled over his shoulder to situate itself on his back. Gary stood up abruptly and began spinning around.

"What the—! What's it doing back there?"

Ivy burst out laughing watching him spin around like an idiot.

"Hey, I think you got a new backpack," Ash said. "Huh, looks like Aerodactyl just wants to hang out there."

Aerodactyl had secured itself to Gary's back by the shoulders and used its new height to sniff the air. Its long tail swished just above Gary's knees.

"I think it's cute," Ivy said. "Gary's Aerodactyl's new Mr. Mom."

"*Shut* up." Gary gave up on trying to shake Aerodactyl off when it became apparent that the Pokémon was not going anywhere. "Besides, you should be glad this guy's the only one. Aerodactyl used to be at the top of the food chain. They were some of the most dangerous predators in the world before they died out."

Ivy shrugged. "Well, I guess they must not have been that great if they went extinct."

"No, believe me. You wouldn't want to encounter an adult. They've found fossils with wingspans up to fifty feet long. That's even bigger than Dragonite."

"Sounds dangerous," Ash said.

"Yeah, but since this one's just a baby, I should be able to train it."

"Oh, really? So you're just gonna keep a Pokémon you yourself said is one of the deadliest predators that ever lived because you think you can train it?"

Gary narrowed his eyes. "Ash—"

"Oh, no," Ash interrupted. "I'm not gonna stand in your way. But you're a hypocrite for giving me crap about Munchlax."

"This is different. Aerodactyl was just born."

"Munchlax is a baby, too, you know. Don't even try to pretend like it's any different."

Gary crossed his arms, and Aerodactyl's tail swished behind him.

"Boys, boys! You're both pretty," Ivy said. "Ash, you can keep Munchlax, and Gary can keep Aerodactyl. Happy? Good, 'cause we need to keep moving."

With a little grumbling, they set off once again. Aerodactyl was determined to ride on Gary's shoulders, so they had to repack their things to give Aerodactyl enough room to hang comfortably over Gary's pack.

The path was getting narrower, and the terrain was becoming noticeably less hospitable to travelers. After another few hours of hiking, they stopped for the night and set up camp before releasing their Pokémon to find food for themselves. Houndour and Growlithe teamed up as usual to hunt down a wild Raticate, and when they alternated roasting it with Fire Fang and ripping off hunks of meat, Aerodactyl became very curious. The trio watched as the newborn reptile stalked closer to the feasting canines, intending to partake of the feast.

"Should we do something?" Ivy asked. "Aerodactyl can't take on both Houndour and Growlithe."

The canines were unwilling to share, and together they scared off Aerodactyl with the threat of teeth and fire. Undeterred, Aerodactyl stalked around the camp and observed the other Pokémon as they ate. Ivysaur was grazing on some kind of bush, while Wartortle and Umbreon didn't bother eating since most Pokémon could go for days, if not weeks, between hefty meals. Nidorino had kept largely to itself since Gary retrieved it from the Pokémon Center in Pewter, but it didn't try to run away or attack the trio, having recognized Gary as its new trainer.

Nidorino sat just a little ways away chewing on a fat Spearow carcass. When it detected Aerodactyl's approach, it looked up once before going back to its meal. Aerodactyl crept closer and sniffed the meat. Nidorino growled in warning, but didn't make any move to chase off the newcomer. Slowly and with visible caution, Aerodactyl prodded the Spearow with its snout. When Nidorino didn't react again, Aerodactyl bit down and used its foot for leverage to rip off one of Spearow's wings to devour.

"Huh," Ash said. "Looks like he's making friends already." Aerodactyl's snout was coated with blood as it ripped and rended through the bird meat. Ash swallowed. "Kinda creepy, though."

They turned in early, but Ash had trouble sleeping on the uneven, stone ground. The wind had picked up, too, and with the fire doused, there was nothing standing between him and the chill of night. Pikachu had crawled into his sleeping bag to keep warm, but the little rodent wasn't doing much for Ash.

To his left, Ivy was curled up in her own sleeping bag and shivering a little in her sleep despite Houndour's naturally warm temperature. Gary lay beyond her with Growlithe.

Screw it, Ash thought to himself.

He rolled to the left until he was back to back with Ivy, and the effect was almost instantaneous. His shivering ceased as their shared body heat warmed him through their sleeping bags, and he sighed in relief. Soon, perhaps from a combination of exhaustion and the naturally soporific effects of newfound warmth, Ash drifted into a dreamless sleep.

The next morning, the winds had only gotten worse. Gary woke from a deep sleep feeling more tired than he had the night before. Though he was no stranger to strenuous physical exertion, the nonstop hiking on a rocky incline left his muscles feeling sore and weary. The uneven, hard ground didn't help matters. His face was numb with windchill, but the rest of his body was pleasantly warm in his sleeping bag despite Growlithe having slept at his back.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was the color brown. As his vision adjusted and he shifted, something heavy kept him in place. When he realized what it was, his mouth went dry. Sometime in the night, the distance between Ivy and him had disappeared. She was curled up with her face pressed into the curve of his neck and shoulder. Her body heat had kept him warm through the night. Behind her, Ash had also scooted close so they were back to back with Houndour lying on top, sprawled out between them. The black canine sat up when it noticed that Gary had stirred.

The wind whistled and brought with it a gust of cold. It was early and the sun was barely up, too soon to feel this cold. The wind disturbed Ivy and she shifted closer in her sleep. Gary had had more than enough of this. Inside his sleeping bag was starting to feel much too warm. So he unzipped it and sat up abruptly. Growlithe was instantly awake and alert as to any threat in the vicinity. Aerodactyl, who had curled up into a surprisingly small ball on top of Gary's sleeping bag, squawked at the sudden shift in position and wandered onto the ground on all fours.

"What the hell?" Ivy stirred, half awake.

"Sorry," Gary mumbled as he hastily extricated himself from his sleeping bag and started his morning.

Ivy hadn't seemed to notice what his issue was, and soon both she and Ash had woken up and the three of them were huddled together over a bland breakfast.

"When did it get so cold?" Ivy asked. "I was fine last night."

"I wasn't until we scooted closer," Ash said. "Uh, sorry about that."

Ivy shook her head. "No, I'm glad you did. Better than freezing all night."

Gary took the last three bites of his breakfast and got up without warning. Aerodactyl scampered after him in an attempt to climb onto

his back for its daily ride. Ivy frowned after him.

"What's his problem?"

Ash shrugged. "What *isn't* his problem?"

They were scaling the base of Mt. Moon now on their way to the cave entrance. Growlithe and Pikachu still kept a lookout as they hiked, and Aerodactyl was busy taking in the scenery from its perch on Gary's back. He took point, as usual, and they hiked in silence for the next three hours. The path was carved into the side of the mountain, and they zigzagged back and forth around switchbacks as they climbed steadily higher. In the distance, Gary could make out the dark, interminable expanse that was Viridian Forest. The wind was intolerable, and more than once one of the trio nearly lost his or her balance.

"What was that Brock said about it being an easy shot to Cerulean?" Ivy groused.

By late morning, the path opened up on a plateau in the mountainside. Growlithe ran ahead, barking.

"There it is," Gary said.

Just up ahead about a hundred meters lay the cave entrance to Mt. Moon. The trio stopped at the mouth and examined the placard nailed into the stone wall.

"Hey, check it out," Ash said. "This is one of those markers Brock was telling us about."

The placard was a simple, metal shield. Gary fished around for one of the three headlamps he'd purchased and fitted it on his head.

"These'll be tough to spot in the dark, even with the lights," he said.

"What're you gonna do about Aerodactyl? You haven't technically caught it yet."

Gary thought about that for a moment before handing Ash an empty Great Ball. "You do it. There's no way I'm gonna get him off my back on my own.

Ash grinned. "No problem."

He tapped Aerodactyl with the Great Ball and the large reptile

disappeared in a flash of light. Then he tossed the Great Ball to Gary, who waited a moment until the red light on the release button faded.

"So, does this mean Aerodactyl's technically mine now?" Ash said.

Gary shot him a look and pocketed the Great Ball. Ivy and Ash fitted their own headlamps on.

"Hey, why don't I take point with Umbreon?" Ivy said. "It's gonna be pitch black in there."

"Good idea," Ash said. "I'll bring up the rear with Pikachu."

After recalling Growlithe, who would probably be more of a hindrance than a help in a dark cave, Gary fell into line between Ash and Ivy, and they set off into the inky heart of Mt. Moon. Gary followed Ivy at about a ten foot distance, and Ash lagged behind another fifteen feet or so. Umbreon padded along next to Ivy, seemingly at ease in the dark. It wasn't long until the diffuse light from the cave's mouth faded behind them and they were plunged into a world of perpetual night. Gary had to watch his step as he walked. There was rubble and debris on the cave floor just waiting to send him tripping.

The corridors were wide enough to spread his arms out, and every few hundred feet or so, they would branch off into a series of tributary caves that led who knew where. Gary flashed his light at the mouth of a smaller corridor to his left and startled a Paras that scampered off before he could pull out his Pokédex.

"Whoa, check it out."

Ash was looking up at the ceiling, where sharp stalactites hung like gruesome chandeliers.

"Keep your eyes on the path, Ash. I'm not helping you if you fall."

"Hey, Ivy, wait up!" Ash called as he jogged to catch up to Gary.

Ivy had put some considerable distance between Gary and herself, and now she lingered about thirty feet ahead near a bend in the passage.

"Sorry, I thought you guys were right behind me," she called.

Umbreon's yellow eyes flashed when Gary's headlamp swept over them. How had she gotten so far ahead? The ground was treacherous to walk on in the dark even with their lights. It took Ash and him a

couple minutes to catch up as they carefully avoided potholes and fallen rocks in the path.

"Everyone okay?" Ivy asked when they were all together again.

"Fine, but don't get so far ahead," Gary said.

She saluted him and had the nerve to wink. "Aye, aye, Captain. Wanna hold my hand so you don't get lost again?"

Ash choked on a laugh, and Gary took a deep breath to calm his anger. "If we weren't in the dark with tons and tons of rock hanging precariously over our heads, I might be tempted to kick your ass."

Ivy smirked. "You know how I love to indulge your passion, Gary, but we should probably keep moving."

Ivy turned around and continued deeper into the cave. Ash nudged Gary playfully.

"You know, if you got that stick out of your ass, maybe you'd appreciate a cute girl flirting with you."

Gary rubbed his temples. "I'm not even gonna dignify that load of crap with a response."

Ash hung back a moment to give Gary some walking space, and Pikachu squeaked on his shoulder.

"Yeah, he's a bonehead, all right."

Ash chuckled to himself and resumed trekking. Gary continued to keep an eye on the path ahead of him while looking out for the wild Paras that scuttled out of his way. After another twenty minutes of walking, the main path forked into two separate corridors. Ivy walked down the left one without stopping, and by the time Gary arrived at the fork, he looked both ways and searched for the shield that marked the right path.

"Hey, wait," he called to Ivy. "I don't see a shield marker here."

Ivy walked back as Ash caught up and pointed several feet above eye level. "There it is, on the left passage. See?"

Gary squinted up through the blackness, and his headlamp barely illuminated the shield. "How did you see that? I can barely see it and I'm looking right at it."

Ivy shrugged. "Maybe I just have better eyesight than you."

She went back down the left path with Umbreon, and Gary continued to stare up at the shield.

I didn't see it at all. I can hardly see it now.

"You going?" Ash said.

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

The trio wandered deeper into the bowels of Mt. Moon, and after a while Gary noticed that they were walking on a shallow decline and that the walls had become slick with condensation.

"If I remember, there's a river that runs through the mountains and dumps out into Cerulean Cove," Ash said as he ran a hand over the damp cave wall. "Maybe that's why it's so humid down here."

They started seeing mushrooms growing in the dark. Their pale flesh lacked any coloration, and they almost glowed in the lamp light when Gary moved past them.

"Hey Ash, you hungry?" Ivy called.

"Haha, very funny."

She laughed, and for a while no one spoke. When Ivy led them down another fork in the road without stopping, Gary paused a moment and searched for the shield. Like the one before, it was just barely visible higher up in the wall. He shook his head and continued on.

A scraping sound drew his attention and, suspicious, he looked up and shined his light on the ceiling. Immediately, a school of Zubat started screeching and detached from the ceiling where they had been roosting to fly off in the direction the trio had come. Some swooped so low that they knocked Gary's head, and he was forced to duck down.

"Whoa!" Ash said, also ducking.

The school was gone in a matter of minutes.

"Aw, man." Ash wiped bat guano from his sleeve and made a face. Pikachu scuttled to his other shoulder to get away from the ammonia smell. "Why does this shit always happen to me? No pun intended."

Farther ahead, they came to yet another fork, this time with four

possible passageways. As usual, Ivy kept on going through the presumably correct passage.

"Hold on, guys," Ash called. "I think those Zubat pooped on my hat or something. I can still smell it."

Gary hovered near the mouth of the correct passage while Ivy waited a little ways ahead. She bent down and whispered something to Umbreon, and the black feline trotted back toward Ash, who was busy trying to get the guano out of his hat.

Gary looked around the area, taking note of the stalactites hovering just overhead. If they were to fall, they could impale the trio and kill them all. He frowned at the morbid thought and pushed it out of his mind. "Ash, hurry up."

Umbreon had taken up a place next to Ash and kept watch at his back. Pikachu jumped down from Ash's shoulder and plopped down next to it.

"Oh my god, I think it's on my back, too. Hold on." Ash put his hat back on and started to unzip his stab vest.

BOOM!

The explosion came out of nowhere and sent Gary reeling backward into the wall. His ears were ringing, and nausea clouded his mind as his brain and body teetered, disoriented. He failed to notice the cracks that whined and split along the walls and ceiling until they connected. Rocks and debris rained down from above in thunderous clamor and began to pile up in the intersection.

"Ash!" he yelled.

Hands grabbed him by the arms and pulled him back just as a huge stalactite crashed from the ceiling and landed right where he'd been standing. Smaller rocks pelted him in the head and back, but his armor protected him from the worst of it. He crashed against something warm but firm and felt himself being rolled over onto his stomach. Rocks continued to fall all around and on top of him for the next couple of minutes before a dead silence descended, as though nothing had happened at all.

"Ugh," Ivy said to his immediate right. "You okay?"

Gary coughed and tried to sit up. Small rocks and dust fell from his

back. "Define 'okay'."

They took a few moments to reorient themselves and shakily got to their feet. Gary coughed again and raised a hand to his head, where a migraine was beginning to form from all the dust he'd inhaled.

"Guys! Are you okay? Guys!"

Ash's muffled voice reached them through the thick wall of rocks that now blocked the marked path. Ivy and Gary began feeling around the rock wall for weak points.

"We're here!" Gary said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay. Pikachu and Umbreon are okay, too."

"This thing's pretty solid," Ivy said softly. "I don't think we're getting through here anytime soon."

Gary sighed in frustration. "Goddamnit."

"I dunno if I can get through this way," Ash called from the other side. "I'll have to find a way around."

"Brock said this place is a maze," Ivy said. "We have no idea where those other passages'll lead!"

"I don't really have a choice. It's not like we have any strong Rock-types to dig us out."

Gary was silent as he thought for a moment. "Ash, you should go back to Pewter and tell Brock what happened. He'll be able to clear out the cave-in."

"What? No way! That'll take forever!"

"Well it's that or get lost in here forever!"

"Hey wait, I have an idea," Ivy said. "Ash, Umbreon can detect light that humans can't. She should be able to tell which way will lead to an exit."

There was some shuffling on the other side of the cave-in before Ash said, "Then I'll follow Umbreon. We'll be fine."

"I don't like this. Brock was pretty clear that this path was the best way to get to Cerulean," Gary said.

"Yeah, but not the only path." She took his hand and held his gaze. "Umbreon will find him the exit, and we can meet up on the other side. There's no better Pokémon to be lost in the dark with, trust me."

Her hand was cool in his and dusty with the effects of the rockslide. Even in the darkness, he could detect a certain earnestness in her eyes that pleaded with him to say yes.

"...All right," he relented. "I'll trust you."

Ivy nodded and let him go. "Umbreon, listen to me. Obey Ash until I see you again, okay?"

There was a pause before Ash responded, "I think she heard you. Hey, I'm gonna get going, okay? See you guys on the other side."

"This can't be happening," Gary said.

Ivy selected a Pokéball from her belt and released Houndour. "Well, it is. Let's just get out of here. I don't wanna stick around for another cave in."

With one last look back at the rockslide, Gary fell into step next to Ivy. She let out Houndour to help them navigate the darkness and keep an eye out for any wild Pokémon that might be lurking in the shadows.

"I'm more concerned about what caused it," Gary said. "That wasn't natural."

"I hope we don't find out."

Ash let Umbreon lead the way from the caved-in intersection down the rightmost passage.

"I really hope you know where you're going," he said.

Umbreon ignored him and just kept walking, so Ash followed with Pikachu. This passage was markedly more wild than the one he'd been traveling up until this point. Unlike the main path, this one wasn't cleared out for human passage. Stalagmites sprung up from the cave floor, catching water droplets from the stalactites above. The cave floor was uneven, and more than once Ash caught himself tripping before he impaled himself on a sharp stalagmite. Umbreon walked just ahead, easily weaving around the obstacles like they weren't even there.

"Must be nice to be able to see in the dark," Ash wondered aloud.

I hope those two don't kill each other before they make it outta here.

Brock hadn't been kidding when he said the side tunnels were a maze. Ash passed by so many branching tunnels that it was no wonder this place was known for collecting the bodies of lost travelers. The labyrinthine layout seemed to wind on forever even as Ash followed Umbreon, who presumably knew the right way to go.

After another half hour of slow hiking, Umbreon stopped suddenly. Pikachu's ears were twitching, but it hadn't spooked.

"Umbreon, what's wrong?"

His headlamp didn't penetrate more than five feet of darkness ahead of him, but Umbreon seemed to pick up on something in the stygian stretch of cave ahead of them unbeknownst to Ash and Pikachu.

"What's up there?"

Umbreon sniffed the air and looked back at Ash expectantly.

"Well?"

The black feline swished its tail and began walking again while periodically looking back at Ash. Taking that as his cue to follow, Ash resumed his cautious trek forward.

"Pikachu, stay alert."

The yellow rodent squeaked its understanding. Soon, Ash got the feeling that his headlamp was penetrating farther into the darkness and illuminating more of the cave. Pikachu squeaked and pawed at his hair in excitement.

"Light?"

Sure enough, another five minutes of walking yielded the end of the corridor and opened up into a wide cavern lit up with fluorescent lamps embedded in the cave ceiling. Some of them flickered with age, but for the most part they did a good job of banishing the shadows.

"Umbreon, you're a genius."

The Dark Pokémon lingered near Ash's side, ears twitching. Ash wandered farther into the cavern and began looking around. From the

looks of it, people had been in here working at one point, but the place looked abandoned. There were stainless steel tables that lined the walls and sat side by side with enough room for someone to walk in between them comfortably. The tables were stained in places with a dark brown substance that smelled metallic when he hovered too close. Umbreon hissed at the smell.

Blood?

It was too old and dried out to be positive, but Ash couldn't think of what else left stains like that. Old machinery Ash didn't recognize sat immobile along the tables. He approached the nearest one, which looked a lot like some kind of mechanical arm with a drill bit extension and ran his fingers over its length. The paint was fading, but he could make out one word:

"Silph." Ash frowned. "I know I've heard that somewhere before..."

All of a sudden, Pikachu squeaked loudly in his ear and dug its nails into Ash's shoulder, which would have hurt if not for the armor he wore. Before he could figure out what had spooked the small rodent, someone spoke.

"Well, well, look what we have here, James," a woman said. "An *intruder*."

Ash turned to the source of the voice and spotted a man and a woman dressed in white uniforms. He didn't recognize them, but their clothing bore a bright, red 'R' emblazoned on the front. The woman who had spoken had a pretty face that was twisted in a smirk that reminded Ash of a predator stalking its prey. Her bright, red hair was tied back in a thick ponytail that matched her eyes.

"That just won't do, dear Jessie," James said.

James was a young man with an air of the regal about him, like he was used to telling others what to do and getting his way. He looked down at Ash over his nose with condescending, dark eyes. Most striking of all was his blue dye job.

"Who're you guys?" Ash said, taking a step back and hovering a hand over the Pokéballs at his belt.

Jessie gasped dramatically. "What? You don't know who we are? Oh no, James, you know what this means."

James chuckled. "I think I do."

"We protect the world from devastation."

"And we strive to unite all peoples across the nations."

"To denounce the evils of truth and love!"

James reached out with both hands to the sky. "To extend our reach to the stars above!"

Jessie pointed at Ash. "Team Rocket's blasting off at the speed of light. Try and stop us, and you'll be in for a nasty fight!"

Ash could hardly believe what he was hearing. These guys seemed like clowns with all their rhyming and flailing, but the minute they mentioned Team Rocket, he was on his guard.

"Team Rocket," he said, looking between Jessie and James. "I've heard of you guys. I have it on pretty good authority that you're the reason Pewter City's in bad shape. Is this your base or somethin'?"

James sighed. "Oh dear, looks like we've got an unbeliever on our hands. The Boss won't want that."

"He certainly won't," Jessie agreed. "I say we add him to our laundry list."

"Excellent idea."

"Pikachu," Ash whispered. "Get ready."

Pikachu jumped off of Ash's shoulder and landed next to Umbreon. Its yellow fur spiked and crackled with electricity. Jessie laughed again.

"You know, you're kind of cute. It's almost a shame. But no one can know about Chimera before the Boss is ready. Sorry, you won't be leaving this cave."

James selected a Pokéball from his belt. "Consider yourself lucky. You'll get a sneak preview of Team Rocket's brainchild."

He threw the Pokéball and from within the flash of light, a hulking Rhydon appeared. Or at least, it had once been a Rhydon.

"What the hell?"

Ash stepped back in shock. Where Rhydon's hands should have been, it instead bore a pair of sharp Beedrill stingers that dripped with violet venom. Rhydon's normally impenetrable armor was cracked, like clay that had dried out in the sun. The cracks glowed with veins of red and orange pulsing light. When Rhydon roared, the cracks leaked smoke, like the Pokémon's insides were smoldering. On its head, Ash recognized the same tech Professor Oak had pulled off the Snorlax that had attacked Pallet Town. The wiry tentacles moved seemingly of their own accord and disappeared in Rhydon's ears and nose, and even gouged through its bloodshot, yellow eyes. The smell of burning flesh filled the area as Rhydon emitted more smoke from the cracks in its hide.

Ivy had explained the horrors that Team Rocket was inflicting on Pokémon with the Chimera project, but now that he was seeing the results with his own eyes, it was all Ash could do not to throw up right there. He could barely look upon the grotesque creature.

James produced a small computer no bigger than a Pokédex and punched a few keys. "This guy was a bit of a failed experiment, but even failures can serve a purpose. Have fun, now. We have more bombs to arm."

Jessie and James retreated down the northern corridor on the opposite side of the cavern from where Ash stood, presumably to ensure his entombment in this place.

"Shit," he swore as the Rhydon abomination began walking toward him with ill intent. "I bet that's the way out, but this thing looks like a walking time bomb."

The Rhydon roared and released more black smoke into the air, which was beginning to clog from its mere presence. Ash lifted an arm to cover his nose and mouth, but his eyes began to water and his throat tickled with an oncoming cough spasm.

Not good.

Tired of waiting, Rhydon ducked and charged at Ash, knocking over tables and machinery in the process. Smoke leaked from its open mouth as it got ready to attack.

"Move!"

Umbreon and Pikachu scattered, ducking under tables and weaving around machinery, while Ash jumped on the nearest table and ran as

fast as he could out of Rhydon's way. The charging Pokémon belched out a thick stream of fire that singed Ash's hair just as he got out of the way. Having missed its target, Rhydon skidded to a halt and knocked over more machinery as it lumbered around and searched for Ash again.

"It's using Flamethrower? But how's that even possible?"

The smoke and heat from Rhydon's attack were making it hard to breathe in here. Pikachu appeared next to Ash and, without prompting, delivered a strong Thunderbolt. The jagged light hit Rhydon in the horn on its snout and sent yellow sparks up and down its body, but when Pikachu powered down, Rhydon appeared to be unfazed.

"Electric attacks won't work on a Ground-type," Ash said. "Umbreon! Get in there and blast it!"

Umbreon jumped up on a table several yards away and ran toward Rhydon. The rings on its thick fur glowed a sinister yellow, and Ash couldn't bear to stare into them as he felt himself grow dizzy and nauseous. Then, Umbreon released a powerful wave of dark energy that collided with Rhydon as it began to charge again, throwing it off kilter. Ash shielded his face from the aftershock of the Dark Pulse attack and nearly lost his balance.

But even Umbreon's best wasn't enough to slow down the mutant Pokémon. Rhydon jabbed at Umbreon with one of its stingers, grazing the lithe feline as it jumped out of the way. Umbreon's thick fur protected it from poisoning, but Ash wasn't sure about what a direct hit would do.

BOOM!

Another bomb went off somewhere in the distance, and this time Ash lost his balance and fell off the table he'd been standing on.

"Damnit," he swore. "We have to get outta here."

Rhydon charged again, seeing an opportunity to take out Ash now that he was on the ground and vulnerable. Ash threw a Pokéball and scrambled to his feet.

"Wartortle!" he shouted as the blue turtle materialized. "Aqua Jet!"

Wartortle dug its front claws into the stone cave floor and released a

thick jet of water from its mouth. At the same time, Rhydon unleashed another Flamethrower attack. Fire and water collided in a wall of steam and smoke, and the impact caused a surge of superheated air to sweep through the cavern. Ash turned around and took the blast in his back, where his armor shielded him from permanent damage. The exposed parts of his skin turned pink and began to blister. His eyes stung, and with the added veil of smoke and steam now clouding the room, it became nearly impossible to see clearly.

Pikachu squeaked somewhere nearby and climbed up Ash's pant leg. There was no way he could stick around here much longer if he wanted to live.

"Umbreon! Find a way out!"

The black feline appeared as a dark streak just ahead of Ash, and through squinted eyes he struggled to follow it. Meanwhile, Wartortle had retreated back toward Ash but continued to spray Rhydon with water.

"Keep it up, Wartortle!"

Ash tripped over a fallen piece of machinery and landed hard on his knees. Pikachu abandoned its post on Ash's shoulder and ran back to help Wartortle. Soon, the crackle of electricity popped in the air as everything Wartortle's water had doused burst with electricity. Ash gagged as he finally righted himself and stole a glance back at his Pokémon as they fought to fend off the aberrant Rhydon.

Umbreon had managed to lead Ash to the exit Jessie and James had utilized previously, and not a moment too soon. The sound of splitting rock suddenly became impossible to ignore, and as before, the ceiling started to fall apart. A particularly large chunk of rock hit Ash between the shoulders and sent him crumpling to the ground in agony. Behind him, Wartortle fired off another Aqua Jet, but Rhydon's charging was speeding up and it avoided the attack. The powerful water column collided with the wall and tore open a crack that spiderwebbed toward the ceiling.

Ash struggled to stand on shaky arms and legs. The pain in his back was excruciating, and he suspected he might not be getting up at all if not for the armor he wore. Umbreon pawed the ground in front of him, a silent plea for him to get up and keep going. Rhydon was nearly upon him, and it was all Ash could do to roll out of the way of the charging Pokémon to avoid death by bludgeoning.

Rhydon smashed into the wall just two feet from Ash's head, and the cavern shook. When it pulled its head free, the massive horn on its snout began to spin as it powered up a deadly Horn Drill attack. Ash finally managed to stand and put a hand on the wall. This close to Rhydon, the air was barely breathable, and he choked as he backed away.

Wartortle came flying through the air and rammed Rhydon with its hard shell. The distraction was enough to give Ash time to jog after Umbreon with Pikachu in tow. Wartortle scuttled after them at a slower pace, but Rhydon wasn't done yet. It lunged at Wartortle horn first.

"Withdraw!" Ash shouted.

Wartortle disappeared into its shell and took the attack full-on. Its shell was among the hardest materials in existence, on par with Steelix hide, but Rhydon's Horn Drill managed to crack the tough shell and send Wartortle careening into the wall, opening up yet another crack to add to the cave-in.

"No!"

Ash spun and recalled his unresponsive Pokemon and kept running. His eyes stung with dust, smoke, and steam, and all he could do was trust Umbreon to lead him to safety. Pikachu had caught up to him and clung to his pack. There was no time to check on Wartortle's status as the very real possibility of his impending mortality was stampeding after him in a rage Ash had never witnessed before.

Umbreon went around a bend and sped through the middle passage at the intersection, and Ash didn't even question it. He landed against the wall as he turned the corner and pushed off just as Rhydon rammed the wall with another Horn Drill attack. Pikachu squeaked frantically in Ash's ear.

When Ash saw light up ahead, he wasn't sure if he was hallucinating or if some divine power had taken pity on him. Umbreon didn't slow down, so neither did he. Just a little more, and he'd be free of the cave. Rocks continued to fall in larger and larger chunks, bouncing off Ash's shoulders and hitting the backs of his legs as though they were working against him.

"Rrrwaaaaarrrrrggghhhhh!"

Rhydon released another Flamethrower that moved considerably

faster than the Pokémon itself. The air superheated as the fire sucked up all the oxygen in the narrow passage, and Ash choked on his breath. Umbreon leaped for the exit and Ash followed, uncaring of what lay ahead. Pikachu jumped from his shoulder and soared ahead just as the Flamethrower jettisoned through the falling rocks and hit him in the back. Ash cried out in pain as he felt his skin singe and sear through his flame retardant armor. The Flamethrower's momentum pushed him forward faster and threw him out of the cave just as the entrance caved in, sealing Rhydon within and burying it under tons of superheated stone.

Ash fell and left a trail of black smoke in his wake. He twisted in the air and remembered opening his eyes and seeing nothing but bright light diffused among shadows. Leaves. And when he hit the ground, everything went dark.

Ivy walked beside Gary as Houndour led the way through the dark passage. There was a chill in the cave the deeper they wandered, and breathing became more difficult as the air grew more and more humid. Twice, they encountered Geodude rolling through the passage, but the small Pokémon scurried into tributary corridors at the duo's approach, unwilling to fight an unnecessary battle.

"I'm surprised we haven't met anything a little more dangerous so far," Ivy said. "I would've expected Rhyhorn or something."

"Maybe on the deeper levels, but this is the path Brock said to follow, so it makes sense that we haven't had any bad run-ins. I dunno about the other passages."

His unspoken worry was plain to hear. Ivy crossed her arms for warmth. "I'm sure Ash is fine. He's got all his Pokémon plus Umbreon."

Gary said nothing to that, and she felt a stab of guilt even though it wasn't her fault they'd gotten separated. Gary had the effect, for whatever reason, of encouraging others to take responsibility, for better or for worse.

They continued in silence for another half hour or so, mostly without incident. The darkness was getting to Gary a little if the way he kept stealing glances over his shoulder when he heard imaginary sounds was any indication. Houndour panted and trotted on as though nothing was amiss, and that was more than enough for Ivy to trust that they wouldn't happen upon any nasty surprises around the

corner. That was until Ivy noticed the cave was getting lighter. Houndour yipped, noticing it, too.

"Hey, there's light up ahead," she said.

Gary squinted through the darkness that his headlamp barely penetrated. "Are you sure? I can't see anything."

"Yeah, it's getting lighter. Can't you tell?"

They walked on and sure enough, the darkness abated steadily. Soon, there was a light at the end of the tunnel marking the exit.

"How did you notice that back there? I didn't see it at all," Gary said.

"Who cares? We're almost out, and that means we might be able to find Ash soon. C'mon!"

She ran toward the light, and soon she was outside in a wide clearing. Mt. Moon's walls rose up hundreds of feet on all sides—they were still in the mountain. But the clearing was open air and the sun was high in the sky overhead. Ivy and Gary wandered into the open, and immediately they noticed the massive, opalescent boulder resting in the middle of the clearing. Despite the rough, mountain terrain, flowers in red, blue, and yellow bloomed all around the stone. A river ran along the left-hand side of the clearing and culminated in a waterfall that disappeared over the edge of the mountain.

"Whoa," Ivy said. "What is that?"

She and Gary approached the mysterious stone, only to discover that it was glowing with an inner light. Only its top half was visible above ground while the lower half was buried, like an iceberg floating in the ocean. Houndour was sniffing the air and darting around the area, distracted by something. Ivy didn't pay attention, so entranced by the glowing stone. She put a hand on it and felt a deep, calming warmth radiating from it.

"It's a Moonstone," Gary said. "I've heard stories, but I never thought one this big actually existed."

Unbidden, one of Gary's Pokéballs began to vibrate until it opened of its own accord. Nidorino appeared in a flash of light and approached the Moonstone as if in a trance.

"Nidorino?" Gary fumbled for Nidorino's Pokéball at his belt.

Nidorino touched the Moonstone with its snout and a tremor ran through its body. The quills on its back stood on end, electrified with energy.

"What's happening?" Ivy asked.

As soon as it started, it was over and Nidorino shook itself out like a dog. It pawed at the ground and looked up at Gary expectantly.

A rustling sound from amidst the flowers drew the duo's attention before Gary could answer her question. From a honeycomb of small cave openings behind the Moonstone, small, pink creatures emerged in droves and surrounded the Moonstone.

"Incredible," Gary said. "Clefairy, Jigglypuff, Clefable, and Wigglytuff. I've never seen so many gathered in one place."

Ivy recognized the rubbery, pink bunnies, too. Their fur was short and soft, and their violet eyes were huge and round—cute, in the classical sense. But their fluffy fur concealed claws sharp enough to cut through human flesh if provoked. Their large ears twitched as they picked up on the intruders in their sanctuary. While the Clefairy and Jigglypuff reached for the Moonstone, Clefable and Wigglytuff focused on Ivy and Gary.

"Shit," Gary said. "This is definitely bad."

The Wigglytuff began inflating themselves to several times their natural size, startling Houndour and Nidorino and causing them to backtrack, wary. Meanwhile, the Clefable began waving their paws back and forth in perfect synchronicity. Ivy followed them with her eyes.

Gary picked up on what was happening before Ivy did, and he recalled Nidorino. "Move!"

"What?!"

Ivy recalled Houndour in her confusion and let Gary drag her back. But they didn't get far before the ground began to shake. At first there was only a low rumble, but soon the ground began to split and rock spires shot up from underground with a vengeance. The Clefable had set off multiple Earthquake attacks without lifting so much as a finger.

"It's Metronome!" Gary shouted as they ran. "We have to get out of here!"

The effect was enough to throw the entire area into jeopardy, and the Jigglypuff and Clefairy gathered around the Moonstone scattered in fear. Ivy skidded to avoid a rock spire that erupted from the ground just in front of her and got separated from Gary in the commotion. There was a large cave entrance to the south, but the way the ground was churning under her feet, she was sure she would be dead before she reached it, if it hadn't already caved in by then. The only other way out of this was the river.

So she ran.

"Gary!"

He was also trying to avoid a deadly collision with the rearranging earth, but he picked up on her rudimentary plan and started aiming for the river, too. The ground exploded under Ivy's next step and catapulted her into the air. She hit a rising rock spire hard in her side and shoulder and cried out before plummeting to the ground. She struggled to get up and her hand squashed something soft and malleable—a lone Jigglypuff.

The ground shifted again and threatened to swallow her whole. Swallowing the pain to save for later, she hauled herself to her feet. The Jigglypuff she'd run into was disoriented and having trouble moving, so without thinking, she scooped it up and continued her mad dash toward the river. Gary was hot on her heels, though he limped after taking a hard blow a moment ago. The Jigglypuff in Ivy's arms squirmed in fright from the collapsing landscape, but Ivy didn't have time to worry about it before flinging herself into the freezing water. The river was robust with snowmelt from the higher peaks and took the breath out of her as it beat her along its bed of rocks and sediment. She hit a rock with her upper arm and lost her held breath in the shock of pain, but she held onto Jigglypuff and struggled to get above water. When she broke the surface, she saw Gary somersaulting in the water toward her and reached out with one hand to grab him. They locked arms and he pulled her to him so her back was to him. She tried to call out to him, but her mouth filled with river water. She lifted Jigglypuff above the surface to let it breathe just in time to notice the raging cataract ahead. It registered somewhere in her mind that Gary called her name and tightened his grip on her. And then she was falling head first.

Ivy screamed as the water fell away and only rushing air surrounded Gary and her. It was fast and slow, surreal in a way, and the jagged rocks at the bottom of the waterfall seemed to grow like a monster's

mouth opening wide to devour them whole. She wanted to close her eyes, but before she knew it she was crashing to the bottom, too late to be afraid.

But the rocks never broke her fall.

By some miracle, or perhaps on pure instinct, the Jigglypuff she'd scooped up inflated itself to five times its natural size and hit the rocks first. Its elastic skin gave and Ivy and Gary sank for half a breath, unable to see or hear. But then they bounced and tumbled head over heels, disconnecting in the rollercoaster ride, and landed with a hard smack on the water's surface. The impact was bone-shattering and knocked the wind out of Ivy. It felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer to her back as she sank below the surface and the raging river carried her along. More rocks collided with her as she was swept away, chipping away at her stamina and inundating her with pain anew. When she opened her eyes, all she could see was the refracted sunlight penetrating the rushing water above, and she reached for it with the last of her strength before everything fell dark.

There was a time when she'd loved the water. Be it the beach or a lake, she liked the way it felt on her skin. Refreshing, cleansing, like anything was possible. The sound of rushing waves had a soothing effect, almost cathartic. (But what does a child know of catharsis? Of guilt?)

She would sit and listen to the waves to fall asleep under the sun, away from the world, swept away. It was peaceful like this. At least, that was how she liked to remember it. But that day the waves sounded different, not rhythmic and soothing, but like something descending. Coming for her to sweep her away to a place she didn't know. Talons closed around her skinny arms, a child's arms, unable to fight back as the earth fell away below her, and those waves could no longer reach her. Too far to fall, for even the water would kill her at this altitude.

And when she looked up, she saw those terrible, golden eyes, bigger than her head and slitted as they peered deep into her soul. Hungry. She screamed and closed her eyes.

"Hhuuggghh!"

Ivy sucked in a breath and immediately began coughing. She blinked, disoriented, and dug her fingers into the sandy shore, as if this would

keep her from floating away. The lull of the river was so close, and she could feel its cold waters nudging her ashore. Slowly, she struggled to push herself up on her hands and immediately felt a stabbing pain in her shoulders and back from where she'd gotten pummeled by the Metronome-induced Earthquake attacks.

I'm alive, she thought.

Her vision and hearing slowly adjusted, and she realized she was washed up on a riverbank somewhere. All around, trees and tall grass grew in abundance, fed by the snowmelt that invigorated the river. Sitting up wasn't looking like a good option, so she rolled over onto her back and tried to catch her breath. Above, she could see the sun shining through the leafy canopy. It was lower in the sky than she remembered, and she figured she must have been unconscious for some time. With a grunt of effort, she used her legs to haul herself into an upright position and clutched her aching head in an effort not to vomit.

She stayed that way for a few minutes, just breathing and trying to play back what had happened. Gary had been with her, but where was he now? She had to find him, and then they had to find Ash. With this thought in mind, she braced her palms on the ground and struggled to stand. When her fingers brushed something soft and wet, she recoiled in surprised. The Jigglypuff she'd scooped up in her mad flight lay next to her, unconscious. It was back to its normal, bowling ball size and breathing shallowly. Ivy just stared at it for a moment.

"You saved us..."

Jigglypuff didn't stir, perhaps too tired from the ordeal. Upon closer inspection, Ivy noticed veins of light coursing just under its short fur, like blood through veins. She frowned, wondering what was wrong with the Pokémon. A quick scan of the area didn't turn up Gary, but she hoped he hadn't floated too far off. Finding him was the priority. So, she reached for her last spare ball, one of the Great Balls Gary had purchased just before departing Pewter, and tossed it at the comatose Jigglypuff. It disappeared in a flash of light and Ivy secured the ball to her belt.

"I guess I owe you one, Jigglypuff."

It took her a couple tries to stand upright, and even so her body screamed in protest. The sun had started to dry her out a little, but her clothes were damp and her armor bore scuffs from where the river

rocks had pummeled her. Her shoulder ached immensely from its multiple beatings, and she was sure she'd cracked a few ribs. She was tempted to take some of the Max Potion Lily had given her, but decided against it since she wasn't dying or in danger of dying. Gary could be in much worse shape and need it more than her, anyway. Taking a second to breathe through the pain and orient herself so she wouldn't fall over when she took her first step, Ivy fumbled at her belt for Houndour's Pokéball and released the canine.

"Find Gary," she ordered the pup.

Houndour yipped and began sniffing at the air and the ground. It took a few minutes, but eventually Houndour picked up on Gary's scent, presumably, and bounded south along the river. Ivy hobbled after the Pokémon at a more sedate pace, suddenly wishing she had a larger Pokémon to carry her on its back.

When she found Gary, he was passed out in the river and only a section of stockpiled mulch, leaves, and branches gathered around a stone protruding from the water had stopped his journey downriver.

"Good boy," she said to Houndour as it paced on the shoreline, not keen to get wet.

Taking a deep breath and preparing herself for what would be an unpleasant experience, Ivy waded into the river and made her way to Gary. The water was freezing, and she bit back a yelp. The current was strong, but the water didn't come up past her waist this close to the shore, so she navigated slowly and eventually reached Gary.

There's no way I can haul him out of here against the current.

Biting back a grunt of pain, Ivy lowered herself into the water next to Gary and fumbled around for the Pokéballs at his belt. She grabbed all of them and brought them above water to examine the markers that designated which Pokémon were contained where. When she found the one she was looking for, Ivy released Golduck into the river.

Golduck immediately zeroed in on Gary, and he looked suspiciously between his unconscious trainer and Ivy.

"I know I'm not your trainer," she said, taking care to keep her voice calm and steady, "but Gary's hurt. I need your help to get him to shore."

Golduck made a guttural clucking noise in the back of his throat and

remained wading in the middle of the river. Ivy tried backing away and giving Gary some space. She ended up wading almost all the way back to shore and upstream a ways before Golduck deemed it safe to approach. Once it did, though, Ivy could only watch in awe as it dipped below the surface and ferried Gary to shore with ease. Golduck dragged Gary onto land and hovered over him curiously.

Ivy finally made it out of the water, where Houndour was waiting for her. They slowly approached Gary and Golduck, the latter of whom didn't attack but also didn't show any signs of backing off. Ivy considered releasing Golbat to cow Golduck into submission so she could properly examine Gary for injury, but just as she had the thought, Gary groaned and began coughing up water.

Golduck clucked again and hunched over its trainer. Gary came to and opened his eyes, where he came face to face with the blue Pokémon.

"Golduck," he managed. "How did...?"

"I let him out," Ivy said.

Gary shifted on the ground and faced her. There were scratches on his face and tender areas where he would surely bruise later. Ivy imagined she looked no better. He tried to sit up, but he sank down again, panting. Ivy wandered closer, one eye on Golduck, but the Pokémon let her approach this time without incident.

"Whoa there, Tiger," she said. "Take it easy."

She managed a weak smile that hurt her face to make, and Gary stared up at her, still a little disoriented.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Jigglypuff saved us. You don't remember?"

He took a moment to think about that. "Ah... Where are we?"

"No idea. But I feel about as shitty as you look. At least we're out of the mountain."

Gary tried to sit up again, and this time Ivy helped him. She winced as his weight put pressure on her ribs, but she managed to lend him enough strength to get him upright. Immediately, he held his head in his hands and his shoulders shook.

"I feel like I died."

She laughed a little and instantly regretted it when a lancing pain reverberated through her ribcage. "Could be worse."

"Ash," he said after a moment. "We have to find him."

"Can you walk?"

It took Gary three tries to stand, and he walked with a limp. Ivy lent him a shoulder, but together they moved at a snail's pace.

"Scout ahead," Gary ordered his Golduck. "Come back if you find Ash or Cerulean City, whichever's first."

Golduck slipped back into the river and disappeared below the surface. Houndour trotted along in front of Ivy and Gary, keeping a lookout for any threats or danger. They walked along the riverbank through a heavily wooded area. Through the trees, they could see Mt. Moon's silhouette looming behind them. The river had washed them a good ways downstream toward Cerulean.

"Do you think Ash made it out?" Ivy asked.

"I dunno. But we'll find him either way."

"I don't think we're in any condition to go exploring anytime soon."

"They make some powerful drugs these days."

Golduck reemerged from the river about ten minutes later, and when Gary questioned it about Ash, the Pokémon just stared blankly.

"If that idiot's still hanging out in the mountain, I'll kill him myself," Gary said.

"C'mon, we gotta get some medical help. Then we can go back and look for Ash. Maybe he made it out and he's already in Cerulean."

Gary let his eyes fall. "Yeah, sure."

They hobbled along with Houndour and Golduck flanking them on land and in the water until they came to a clearing in the woods that overlooked a small cliff. Just a stone's throw beyond lay a shimmering city at the mouth of a cove to the north where multiple rivers, including the one they were following, emptied into the sea. Dark, tangled mangroves covered the shoreline so that it was impossible to

tell where land ended and the sea began.

"C'mon," Gary said. "If Ash is down there, he'll be looking for us, too."

Time was a blur of pain and alien sounds as Ash lay, unmoving, on the forest floor. He didn't know how long he'd been here or where 'here' was, only that the brightness he'd detected before faded until there was no light left at all. Leaves crunched around him periodically, like something was moving, and every once in a while he felt something warm and rough rubbing his cheek. He drifted in and out of consciousness, knowing he couldn't stay here but unable to move, let alone draw in anything more than the shallowest of breaths.

Eventually, the rustling kicked up to a more frantic level as whatever had lingered near him went on high alert. Ash barely registered the smell of ozone as electricity popped in the air near his head.

"Oh my god," a voice said. "Are you okay?"

She sounded distant, as though in a dream. And perhaps he was dreaming. Who would be wandering around in the middle of the woods so late in the day?

"Easy."

Ash forced his eyes open and noticed Pikachu and Umbreon standing guard over him as they faced off whoever had shown up.

"Easy, there," the woman's voice repeated.

There was a flash of light, and soon he heard footsteps crunching closer to him. In the fading light of day, Ash could barely see two feet in front of him. Someone leaned over him and ran soft hands over his face to get to his neck, where they lingered to find a pulse. Ash groaned, and the woman recoiled in shock.

"You're alive," she said.

Ash's throat was dry and scratchy, and his back stung like he'd been flayed and laid to rest on a bed of salt. Tears blurred his vision, and he struggled to make out the face of his discoverer. He discerned a shock of red, almost orange, hair and big, blue eyes. She leaned in close as she studied him. He couldn't make out her expression very well, so he concentrated on those bright eyes that seemed to reflect a light all their own. Like gazing into the ocean at sunrise.

"You'll be okay. You're safe now."

"W-Who...?"

She looked startled to hear him speak, but when she rested the cool palm of her hand over his forehead, he almost felt a little better.

"I'm Misty," she said. "And I'm gonna help you."

6. Cerulean City, Part 1

Triumvirate, chapter 6: Cerulean City, Part 1
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

By the time Gary and Ivy made it past border patrol and to the hospital in Cerulean, they were both about to pass out. They'd only made it this far out of sheer will. Houndour's yipping cheered them on as they went, but only barely. When the receptionist at the hospital's front desk saw them all but stumble through the automatic sliding doors, she stood up abruptly and paged a doctor over the PA system. Within minutes, both Gary and Ivy were on stretchers connected to IV drips as the doctors and nurses examined them.

At some point, Gary must have passed out from sheer exhaustion, because the next thing he knew he was feeling refreshed and rested, and the debilitating pain in his limbs from the freak accident in the river had dulled to a negligible prickle. The room he was in was boxed in on all sides save for a closed door, and only the lamp in the corner offered dim lighting that was easy on the eyes. Like any hospital, it was painted off-white and smelled faintly of bleach. But it was quiet, and the blankets someone had tucked him in were warm and clean.

He tried sitting up and found himself wrapped up tightly with bandages that held his shoulders and back in a rigid, straight hold. The IV drip in his arm was connected to a pouch on a stand holding a faintly glowing, yellow liquid that he recognized to be a Hyper Potion. He swallowed and found that his throat was on fire. Clutching his neck with a hand, he looked around for something to drink and found a glass of water on the nightstand next to his bed and downed its contents in three gulps.

Still not satisfied, he slipped off the bed and tested his legs. They didn't pain him to put pressure on them, so he took a step, then another. He grabbed the IV stand and gingerly walked to the silver sink on the other side of the room and refilled the glass. Someone had removed his armor and clothes and folded them on the chair next to another matching set. Understanding, he turned around and saw the curtain that bisected the room and wandered over to it, water in hand. When he pulled it back, he found Ivy sleeping on a small cot identical to his in a matching hospital gown. Her face bore evidence of lacerations and bruises, but the Hyper Potion coursing through her system was working its magic and healing her slowly.

Gary touched his own face and felt rough scabbing where he'd collided with river rocks and the Clefable's magically-induced Earthquake attacks. In a matter of hours, all but faint scarring from the deeper wounds would be gone. He thought of Ash and gazed at the wall clock—3:52 am. Too late to go searching, and it would be prudent to wait for the Hyper Potions to finish healing them.

Ivy frowned in her sleep and tossed her head lightly. She was having a dream, something unpleasant from the looks of it. Gary reached out a hand before he could think to stop himself and rested it over her forehead, which was cold and a bit clammy. Perhaps it was the pressure of an unknown weight, but she slowly calmed and drifted back into a more peaceful state as she breathed deeply. Gary hovered there for a moment before letting his fingers trail down her cheek, gently tracing the gashes that were slowly stitching themselves together. Then he ran his fingers through her long hair. It was soft and thick, if not a little dirty and tangled from their excursion through Mt. Moon. Gary caught himself before he could wake her with his gentle tugging and immediately backed away and settled for a glower.

Maybe I really hit my head pretty bad.

Seeing no option but to rest for the remainder of the night so they could set out early to look for Ash, Gary wandered back to his side of the room and drew the curtain closed for privacy. He left the full glass of water on Ivy's nightstand for her to drink when she woke.

The next morning, Gary woke up again feeling even better than he had the previous night. He felt his face and confirmed that the cuts and bruises he'd suffered had shrunken to the point of being almost completely gone. His legs didn't ache anymore, and the only pain in his back was from a crick in his neck from the uncomfortable hospital cot. Ivy was awake, too, and stretching. A nurse rummaged about in a cabinet by the sink.

"Oh, you're both awake," she said when she noticed Gary stir. "Welcome back."

He rubbed his eyes. "Good to be back."

The nurse, a portly woman in a hospital uniform with kind eyes smiled warmly. "You two are lucky. You came through Mt. Moon, right?"

Ivy yawned and said, "Yeah. Well, sort of."

The nurse removed her IV and patched up her arm where the needle had punctured the skin. "Like I said, lucky. I guess you got out just before the cave-in. The Gym was working on getting it cleared, but it looks like they'll have to get Pewter to take care of it. It's just a disaster."

Gary paled as he digested the nurse's words. "Cave-in?"

"Oh, yes," she said as she disposed of the now empty IV bag Ivy had been using. "The whole thruway between Pewter and Cerulean's sealed up good. No one knows how it happened yet, but the police are investigating."

"Did they find any survivors?" Ivy asked before Gary got the chance.

The nurse sighed. "I'm afraid not, but if anyone got stuck in there, I'm afraid they'll be there for a while, if they survived the cave-in at all, of course. Mt. Moon is such a dangerous place. I can't imagine why anyone thinks it's safe to go galavanting around in there." She blushed, remembering her audience. "I mean, I'm relieved you two are okay. But it's the principle of the matter."

Gary yanked the IV drip out of his arm and got out of bed. Ivy was quick to follow his example, and they started getting dressed in their regular clothes and armor.

The nurse gaped in surprise. "Wait a minute! What do you two think you're doing? You should be resting!"

With the situation too dire to worry about modesty, Gary and Ivy hastily dressed and gathered up their things.

"Sorry," Ivy said to the nurse. "But we have to go. Thanks for all the help!"

Gary didn't even bother acknowledging the flustered nurse and raced out of the room toward the lobby, assuming Ivy wouldn't be far behind. The receptionist saw them bolting out of the ward like they were on fire and called after them about needing to pay for the service. But Gary barely heard her as he and Ivy peeled outside. The sun was still low on the eastern horizon, but already Cerulean was sparkling to life. Stone fountains sat in the middle of intersections surrounded by carefully tended flowers. Their geysers filled the air with a pleasant rushing sound and cool spray carried by the breeze coming in from the cove up north. The architecture was like night and day compared to Pewter City. The buildings were crafted of cut stone

and glass, lending them to large, wide windows and skylights. The place had an open-air, almost futuristic look to it. The combination of the morning sun and the bubbling fountains that filled the air with water spray gave the city a shimmering look, like it was underwater. Only the Pokémon Center violated the local style with its red roof and blocky letters that acted as a beacon to wandering trainers in need of help.

Gary jogged down the street, following the street signs past the Pokémon Center to the north, where the city surrendered to the wilds of Routes Twenty-Four and Twenty-Five and the narrow sea beyond. "If Ash made it out of the cave-in, he would've ended up somewhere farther north. Only the Pewter-Cerulean thruway empties out onto Route Four," he explained as they went.

"We'll find him."

When they reached the northern edge of the city, the paved street came to an end and gave way to sand. Up ahead, a narrow bridge spanned the river Gary and Ivy had fallen into. On the other side, the wilderness had overrun the area, but they could make out a trodden path winding to the northeast. Gary reached for two of the balls at his belt and let out Scyther and Aerodactyl. The volant reptile immediately climbed onto Gary's back and settled on his shoulders where it could peer at Scyther, who all but ignored the baby Pokémon.

Ivy released Houndour. "We better take it slow. There's no telling what we'll find up there."

Gary set off over the bridge and, once on the other side, ordered Scyther to stay ahead and clear the path. "It's mostly Bugs and Grass-types until we get to Route Twenty-Five. Scyther should have no problem with them."

Ivy grabbed his hand and forced him to look back at her. "Hey, we'll find him, okay?"

Gary didn't pull away, but he averted his gaze. "I should've made him turn back to Pewter."

"It's not your fault this happened. For all we know, Ash made it outta there okay and he's just wandering around lost. He's bad with directions, anyway."

"Look, I know you're trying to make me feel better, but don't. I don't

need it. What I need is for you to stay alert and make sure nothing jumps out at us from behind."

"Of course, you got it."

Aerodactyl squawked at a flock of Pidgey that passed overhead and took refuge in a tree somewhere to the north. It shifted its weight on Gary's back and swished its tail, eager to pounce but unable to fly after the Pidgey.

"Aerodactyl," Gary said. "You can eat anything you can catch so long as you don't slow us down."

Aerodactyl sniffed the air and narrowed its eyes at the myriad invisible smells in the woods. Without further ado, Gary and Ivy set off with Scyther in the lead. They munched on granola bars as they went, unwilling to stop for a proper breakfast when Ash's fate was still uncertain.

Almost immediately, small Grass-type Pokémon emerged from the thickets to watch them pass. Houndour growled at a Bellsprout that wandered too close and scared it off with the threat of a Fire Fang. Ivy whipped out her Pokédex and took stock of the Bellsprout and Oddish they encountered, but otherwise the trip remained silent as neither she nor Gary engaged in conversation.

Scyther slashed at the overgrown vegetation blocking their path in places, taking care to swipe any Venonat or Weedle that were also in the way. Aerodactyl jumped from Gary's back without warning and pounced on a Caterpie inching unawares on a tree branch above. It devoured the green caterpillar in two bites.

Gradually, the woods gave way to softer ground that turned into a marsh. The trees remained relatively dense, but Gary and Ivy found themselves sinking into water. The rivers that emptied into Cerulean Cove branched into tributaries that had long ago flooded the land surrounding the city to the north and northeast, creating corridors of water that wove among the mangroves and taller trees overheard. Houndour whimpered, unwilling to get too wet, so Ivy recalled it to its Pokéball. Gary similarly recalled Scyther and released Golduck to guide them.

"No surprises," he said.

Golduck waded ahead until the water was deep enough to swim and disappeared below the surface to flush out any hiding Pokémon that

could be a threat to the trainers.

"Too bad this armor isn't waterproof," Ivy said as they waded up to their waists.

"Just watch your step."

Mangroves overtook the swampy area while trees provided shade from the sun overhead. The brackish water was still, and Gary and Ivy followed Golduck down a flooded corridor wide enough for them to walk side by side. Aerodactyl made deep-throated growling noises as its dark eyes shifted left and right, searching for movement among the gnarled roots and vines that caged them in on all sides.

Movement up ahead startled Gary, and Golduck splashed violently before disappearing completely underwater once more. For a couple breaths, nobody moved and there was utter silence. Then, Golduck burst from the water with a Goldeen in its mouth—at least, what was left of it. The fish flailed in Golduck's bill but soon fell still with a sickening crunch as Golduck bit down. Gary eyed the sharp horn on Goldeen's head and forgave Golduck its shoddy table manners for saving them from what could have turned into a lethal encounter. Goldeen's blood stained the water and Aerodactyl squirmed, the smell intoxicating. Soon, it could not resist and it leaped from Gary's back and slipped into the water.

"Aerodactyl!" Gary splashed around in search of the reptile, but Aerodactyl used its underdeveloped wings to propel itself toward Golduck as though it were born to be in the water. It long tail swished like a snake and gave it momentum as it dove into the bloodstained water and snatched the chunk of Goldeen that Golduck hadn't already swallowed.

"Damn," Ivy said. "Aerodactyl really can't say no to a free meal."

The winged reptile poked its head out of the water and scarfed down the rest of its breakfast as Golduck looked on, only mildly interested. Gary pulled out his Pokédex and scanned Aerodactyl. The entry came up as having no data on it, but he registered the picture and began typing.

"Okay, I'll give you *amateur* scientist," Ivy said.

He was finished quickly and pocketed the small computer once more. "I doubt even specialists know Aerodactyl could swim. Besides, it's not like we got slowed down too much. Let's keep moving."

Aerodactyl elected to remain in the water with Golduck, but while the blue Pokémon scouted ahead like it was ordered to do, Aerodactyl was too busy stalking the mangroves for more food. It scared the hell out of a Krabby that tried to scuttle away among the roots, but Aerodactyl darted out of the water like a wraith and pounced. It sank its jaws into the Krabby but failed to crack the hard shell. Krabby, meanwhile, snapped its sharp, red pincers at anything within reach and managed to knock Aerodactyl in the head. Unable to crack the shell, Aerodactyl was forced to relinquish its prize and Krabby hastily scuttled away under the water.

"It's only a few days old, after all," Gary said as he and Ivy passed by.

Aerodactyl slipped back into the water and continued its hunt for prey, undeterred. Gary and Ivy continued wading along for the next hour or so, largely without incident. Golduck took care of the aquatic Pokémon that lurked out of sight below the surface, mostly Magikarp, Goldeen, and Krabby.

"I expected stronger Pokémon given this place's creep factor," Ivy said as Golduck scared off another Krabby.

"Seaking are bad news, but it's not their spawning season," Gary said absentmindedly.

"You really know a lot, huh?"

He shot her a glance over his shoulder. "I'm Samuel Oak's grandson."

"So? It's not like you were born knowing all that stuff."

He returned his gaze forward, suddenly a little uncomfortable. "Whatever, it's not a big deal."

Eventually, they reached a break in the river corridor. To the right, the canal widened and joined with other tributaries to empty into the sea beyond. To the left, the water level slowly lowered and gave way to a morass that submerged them to about mid calf.

"Mt. Moon is that way," Gary said, indicating the left path. "We should check out the area. A lotta the tunnels empty out directly into the woods."

They were in agreement and headed for the shallower waters. Aerodactyl scurried after them and reclaimed its perch on Gary's shoulders. Bellsprout snoozed in the shallow water, soaking up

nutrients from the silty swamp floor through their root-like feet. Golduck ignored them, and they in turn ignored Ivy and Gary's passage.

But when Golduck suddenly froze without warning and craned its neck to listen to something indiscernible to the trainers, Gary was instantly on high alert.

"What is it?" he whispered.

Aerodactyl swished its tail and dug the sharp talons on its wing joints into Gary's armored shoulders. Something had spooked the Pokémon, but there didn't appear to be anything amiss. Ivy let her hand hover over the Pokéballs at her belt.

The Bellsprout nestled among the mangrove roots were suddenly wide awake and shrank back among the roots to hide. Gary noticed that the water was beginning to ripple, like something was driving a current that hadn't been there before. He held his breath, green eyes squinting in all directions to try to give his paranoia corporeal form.

He didn't have to wait long.

The water just ahead erupted as something massive reared out of it. Before he even got a chance to react, Golduck spat out a thick column of water and narrowly stopped the glob of poison that was hurtling straight for Gary. A massive Arbok towered above them, its substantial length concealed by the murky water. Venom dripped from its serrated fangs as it flared its painted hood in an effort to intimidate Golduck into submission.

"Where did—"

Ivy didn't get a chance to finish her sentence when a piercing scream filled the area. From the thick of mangroves emerged a huge Victreebel. It moved on fleshy, green leaves at an unbelievably fast rate given its bulk and flung itself into the water near Arbok. Victreebel's gaping maw dripped a clear mucous that gave off a cloyingly sweet smell that made Gary's eyes water.

"This must be our lucky day, Jessie," a man's voice said. He appeared a distance behind the Victreebel and Arbok. "I do love spring cleaning."

"Yes, I was just thinking the same thing, James," a woman said, appearing next to James. "No one's supposed to be out here. We can't have you snooping around."

Before Gary had a chance to say anything, Ivy hissed, "Team Rocket."

"Oh, so you know us?" Jessie said, grinning. "Even better. Then you'll know it was Team Rocket that put you in your graves. Unfortunately, we can't have anyone knowing we were here, sweetie."

"Fuck you," Ivy spat. "Take your best shot."

Jessie immediately stopped grinning. "Aren't you a mouthy one? Arbok! Start with her!"

Arbok hissed and prepared to fire up another Sludge Bomb. Gary held out a hand to keep Ivy back and reached for Nidorino's Pokéball. A flash of light burst upon the water next to Golduck, but the ensuing thud that shook the ground startled not only Arbok, but Gary and Ivy, as well.

"Holy *shit*!" Ivy said.

Gary stared in shock as the Pokéball's release light faded and revealed the towering form of a truly enormous Nidoking. It stood nearly ten feet tall, and its spiked tail alone was thicker around than a man's waist. Its steely, grey hide was so dark it was almost violet, and wicked thorns covered its back and arms. They glimmered in the sunlight where the poison seeping from them beaded at the tips and edges.

"Nidoking," Gary said, breathless.

How?

"Arbok!" Jessie screeched.

The giant cobra threw back its head and spit out a thick glob of venom. Without prompting, Nidoking lunged in front of it and caught it against its crossed arms. The poison splattered, but Nidoking seemed totally unfazed.

"Get in there, Victreebel," James said.

There was no time to question in the face of danger as Jessie and James prepared to attack with lethal force.

"Nidoking!" Gary shouted, getting the huge Pokémon's attention. "Crush that Arbok!"

Nidoking bellowed and spun around. Its armored tail smacked into

Arbok with enough force to send the heavy snake flying—far. Arbok crashed into the mangroves nearly fifty feet deep into the swamp and screamed, but its thick hide protected it from permanent damage and soon it was slithering back into the water looking for an opening to attack.

Meanwhile, Victreebel began to shudder and fired off a hail of Razor Leaves. Gary was too slow to react while he was focusing on Nidoking, and the green projectiles hit Golduck and drew deep gashes in its arms and belly. Ivy rolled to avoid them, but she was also struck in the back and got the wind knocked out of her. The armor protected her from physical injury, though, and didn't even scratch.

"That's it," James said. "Now, Acid!"

Victreebel coughed up a hissing, purple spray that shot through the air and rained poison upon a twenty foot radius in all direction. Ivy and Gary ducked down and covered their exposed heads as the acid smoked upon their armor. But Brock had been true to his word when he assured them the material was poison splatter-proof.

Golduck was bleeding heavily from the damage it had taken from Victreebel's Razor Leaf, so Gary recalled it and let out Scyther. As he did so, Aerodactyl took the opportunity to leap from his shoulders. It flapped its wings, which gave it a small boost, and while it couldn't fly yet, the boost was enough to propel it directly onto Victreebel's fleshy hide. With a battle cry that would have been more impressive if Aerodactyl were more than a few days old, the scrappy reptile sank its talons into Victreebel's flesh and started tearing into it with its serrated teeth.

"Scyther, Fury Cutter!" Gary commanded. He didn't wait to see the follow through, knowing Scyther was fast and reliable. Instead, he turned back to Nidoking, who was now struggling against Arbok's deadly Wrap attack since Gary had neglected to keep an eye on it.

"Bite it!"

Nidoking roared and sank its fangs into Arbok's scaly flesh. The snake hissed in pain and began to bleed.

"Poison Fang!" Jessie said.

Arbok made a valiant effort to bite Nidoking, but its fangs couldn't penetrate the behemoth rodent's armored skin and any poison it released just washed over Nidoking like water.

Ivy, meanwhile, had no Pokémon that she could use against Team Rocket in this environment. Houndour couldn't stand water, and the trees were too thick and low to the ground for Golbat to properly move around. Larvitar and Jigglypuff were also still out of commission. So instead, she slipped around Gary as carefully as she could and headed for Jessie and James themselves. She drew the hunting knife at her thigh and stalked closer until she was within lunging distance. Jessie didn't even realize Ivy had snuck up on her until it was too late.

With a grunt, Jessie fell backward and took only a shallow cut across her collarbone from Ivy's knife. Any later and it would have been her windpipe on the ground instead of a strip of her uniform.

"You bitch!" Jessie flipped backward and drew her own knife.

Ivy didn't let up and lunged for her. Jessie was skilled in hand to hand combat, and their weapons clashed with a flurry of sparks and a ringing clang of metal on metal.

Gary saw what Ivy was doing, but he had his hands full defending against Arbok and Victreebel. Scyther's Fury Cutter cut a deep gash through Victreebel's leathery skin, and green blood sprayed and mixed with the water. The giant pitcher plant shrieked and twisted, releasing two lash-like vines that wrapped around Aerodactyl and forcibly pried it off before it could cause any more damage. Then it hurled a dazed Aerodactyl with all its might into a tree. The bark split on impact, and Aerodactyl sank to the swamp floor, unmoving.

Before Gary had time to react, James shouted, "Vine Whip!"

Victreebel slashed Nidoking with its sentient vines, and the large Pokémon roared in pain. It was all the distraction Arbok needed to re-situate itself around Nidoking and squeeze as hard as it could. Nidoking faltered and fell to one knee, overwhelmed and with no one to direct a possible counter-strike as Gary's attention was split several ways.

Ivy caught Jessie's knife on her arm bracer and hissed when Jessie dragged the blade along her arm and cut into Ivy's exposed hand. She grabbed the blade with her ruined hand and yanked hard enough to throw Jessie off balance before driving her own knife into Jessie's right shoulder between where she assumed the armor plating was sewed together under the uniform. Her aim was true, and Jessie cried out. They parted, and Jessie clutched her bleeding shoulder, panting,

while Ivy cradled her filleted hand to her chest. It was her dominant right hand, and while she'd trained to fight with both, she knew she would be at a huge disadvantage if James intervened now.

To her and Gary's horror, James tossed out another Pokéball and retreated to lend Jessie an arm. From within the light, a scarred Weezing appeared. Its flesh was like hardened sludge marred with pock marks and old scars, a sign of the Pokémon's proven mettle in battle. James was helping Jessie fit a mask of some sort over her face and he'd already donned his own. Gary backed up.

"Ivy! Get away from there!"

James narrowed his eyes and smirked behind his mask. "Poison Gas," he commanded.

The Weezing opened its mouth and revealed several flat, rotted teeth. From its mouth and the various craters on its body, it released a thick, purple cloud of gas that permeated the air at an alarmingly fast rate. Ivy tried to run, but Victreebel stood between her and Gary, blocking her escape.

"Gary!" she screamed.

His eyes began to itch and water as the poison spread. It was only a matter of time before it clogged the air and made it into his system. Weezing gas was lethal without an antidote administered within minutes of infection, and Gary had none on him, let alone a double dose for Ivy.

"Haze!"

Gary's vision had begun to double, and he couldn't identify the origin of the unknown voice as he stumbled to the ground and covered his mouth and nose with his sleeve. A dark mist rose from the water and blotted out the sun, but almost instantly, the asphyxiating effects of the Poison Gas abated. Gary sucked in a clean breath and doubled over coughing. There was no tingling in his lips or fingertips, and while he was no expert, he had a feeling he'd avoided inhaling the gaseous venom.

"Whirlpool!"

The newcomer shouted again, and all of a sudden the swamp water began to rush as though psychically drawn. The Haze began to clear, and Gary could make out a devastating Water attack culminate in a

living water spout that slammed into Weezing.

"Gary!" Ivy shouted.

She was splashing toward him, and he pulled himself up to meet her. "Get behind me," he said when he saw the state of her hand.

The newcomer, clearly a Pokémon trainer and a damn good one, at that, commanded a sleek Vaporeon, a Golduck, and a Starmie all at once effortlessly. Her appearance had thrown a wrench in Team Rocket's strategy, and now Weezing was caught up in a living whirlpool the Starmie was controlling with its natural Psychic abilities. James tore off his mask in a rage.

"Victreebel, Leaf Storm! Aim for the woman!"

The Victreebel was still standing despite the gaping wound in its belly. The enormous leaves at its base quivered, and it launched what looked like a superpowered Razor Leaf attack at the woman directly.

"Vaporeon!"

Vaporeon leaped forward and the water rose around it and coated its thick fur like armor. The Mermaid Pokémon threw itself in the midst of the Leaf Storm and released its Mirror Coat. Enchanted water exploded from all sides and collided with the flying leaves, knocking them off course and effectively nullifying the attack.

"Arbok!" Jessie yelled.

The purple serpent disentangled itself from Nidoking and slithered through the water toward the unnamed trainer, but Gary wasn't about to let it.

"Toss it, Nidoking!"

Nidoking lurched to its feet and caught Arbok in the tail before it could slither out of reach, digging its claws into the snake and puncturing the thickly-laid scales. Nidoking reeled in the purple serpent with both hands and, with a powerful grunt, rose up on its hind legs and launched Arbok into the air. The snake coiled on itself, afraid and bleeding from the various wounds Nidoking had inflicted in the course of their battle.

"Golduck, hit it with Hydro Pump!"

The unnamed trainer's Golduck spat out a highly pressurized jet of water that slammed into Arbok with enough force to send the heavy snake crashing through several trees, snapping them in two before it crumpled to the ground, still.

"Arbok!" Jessie shrieked.

James recalled his wounded Victreebel and Weezing and backed up with Jessie. "This isn't over."

Before anyone could stop them, James threw something onto the ground and a cloud of thick, white smoke exploded. Gary and Ivy broke out into coughing fits as the peppery, white smoke occupied every square inch of the clearing. It took a couple minutes for the breeze to clear the air, and when it did, Arbok was gone and Team Rocket had vanished. Gary and Ivy recovered slowly, and Gary looked around for Aerodactyl. It was passed out and injured, half submerged in the water at the base of the tree Victreebel had flung it against. He picked up the comatose Pokémon, relieved to find that it was still alive. Nidoking was down on one knee and visibly exhausted from its continuous constriction by Arbok.

The unnamed trainer, a woman who looked to be around Gary and Ivy's age, approached them with her three Pokémon flanking her. "Who are you and what're you doing out here?"

"Us? We could ask you the same thing," Ivy shot back.

"I'm gonna ask you one more time," the girl said. "Who are you?"

Gary put himself in between Ivy and the girl next to Nidoking, who peered down at him and lowered its head as if to charge at the girl in case she made any suspicious moves.

"Not who you think we are, apparently. We're just here looking for our friend. I'm Gary, and that's Ivy."

The girl peered at them, suspicious, as she seemed to consider what Gary said. "A friend?"

"Ash," Ivy said. "We got separated in Mt. Moon."

"There was a huge cave-in in Mt. Moon."

"That's why we're out here looking for him," Gary said, the frustration evident in his tone. "We don't have any problem with you. You're

obviously not with Team Rocket since you helped us back there."

The girl's Pokémon waited on the balls of their feet for their master's command. But she recalled all but the Vaporeon and returned the Pokéballs to their slots in her armor, which Gary noticed was similar to his and Ivy's except that the lining looked more porous, perhaps waterproof.

"Okay," she said. "I had to make sure you weren't looking for Bill. Sorry for the suspicion."

"Bill?" Gary pondered the name. "Wait, you don't mean the famous researcher, do you? I heard he'd settled in Cerulean."

The girl was on her guard again. "You know him?"

"Only by reputation." He hesitated before adding, "I'm Gary Oak. My grandfather's Professor Samuel Oak. He's talked about Bill in the past. That's how I know about him."

All traces of skepticism evaporated as the girl visibly relaxed. "Gary Oak. I heard Professor Oak had a grandson following in his footsteps. Listen, I'm sorry for all the questions. Those Team Rocket guys have been snooping around Cerulean looking for Bill. They say it's to recruit him as a consultant on a project they're working on, but I don't trust them with everything that's going on in Pewter City. The Gym Leader there, Brock, warned me to be careful of them. When they started looking around here for Bill, I helped him go into hiding."

"You're right about Team Rocket," Ivy said. "Whatever they want this Bill guy for won't be good, I can promise you that."

The girl looked between the two of them and took a moment to think before speaking again. "You said you were looking for your friend. Did he have a Pikachu and an Umbreon with him, by chance?"

Gary nearly choked on his words. "Y-Yeah, that's Ash. You've seen him?"

"Yeah, I've seen him. He was barely breathing when I found him in the woods around here. Looked like he'd jumped from one of the tunnels instead of taking the narrow path down like a normal person. But he's alive, somehow. I can take you to him."

"Please."

She nodded and gestured for them to follow. Gary recalled Nidoking and Scyther, who had remained perched among the mangroves, observing.

"I'm Misty, by the way," the girl said.

"Thanks for your help, Misty," Ivy said.

Misty smirked back at them. "Follow me. It's not far."

When Ash woke, he wasn't in much better shape than he'd been the last time he'd been conscious. His whole body ached like it had been rolled over hot coals and left to fester. Bleary-eyed, he looked around and noticed an IV drip filled with some kind of purple liquid. It was connected to a tube that disappeared into his arm. A squeak sounded from somewhere nearby, and then something dropped onto his chest with enough pressure to make him cough.

"Ouch."

Pikachu squeaked excitedly as it peered into Ash's face. He lifted a hand and patted the yellow rodent on the head, only then noticing that he wasn't wearing his armor anymore and bandages concealed his skin. Further inspection revealed more bandages, stained red and brown in places, covering most of his body. It hurt to breathe. The room he was in had no windows, and the walls were made of concrete. The air was stale and a little chilly, the the place got no circulation. It reminded him of being in the basement of Professor Oak's lab, and he wondered if he was in fact underground somewhere.

"Where am I?"

Umbreon hopped up on the bed and curled up at Ash's feet. He was relieved to see the black feline made it out of the cave after Ivy had entrusted it to him. Ash tried to sit up, but the burn was too intense and he gave up, panting with the effort.

"Oh, you're finally awake."

An older man who looked to be in his mid to late thirties appeared at Ash's bedside. He wore plain clothes that were noticeably shabby and worn in, but clean. His face was soft and round, and the look in his dark eyes was concerned and curious. Something about him made Ash relax, like he was in good hands with an old friend.

"Yeah," Ash said. "What happened?"

"Now that's a tale. Honestly, I ain't gotta clue how you're still alive, kid."

His accent was thick and instantly recognizable, and Ash guessed he must be from the Orange Islands far to the south. He asked as much.

"Hah, guess I still got the twang, huh? Can't lose it, even after all this time. But anyways, what's your name? And why in the world were you wandering around Mt. Moon all by yourself?"

"I'm Ash Ketchum, from Pallet Town."

Ash explained very briefly that he'd been traveling to Cerulean via Mt. Moon with a couple friends, but they got separated in a cave-in.

"Good grief. That cave-in? It damn near collapsed half the mountain. May not seem like good luck to ya now, lyin' there like that, but it coulda been a helluva lot worse for ya."

"Who—" Ash coughed, and the man passed him the glass of water on the small nightstand next to the bed. Once Ash had gulped down half of it, he continued, "Who're you?"

The man smiled. "The name's Bill. I live out here. And for your sake, it's a good thing, too. You coulda been a goner by the time Misty gotcha to the city."

Misty...

"She saved me," Ash said. "I remember, there was a girl named 'Misty' who found me in the woods."

Bill nodded. "Misty and her sisters've been helpin' me hide out here. Ya know, you really *are* lucky that she found you, of all people. No one better qualified to navigate Route Twenty-Five than her, that's for sure."

Ash tried to collect his thoughts. Pikachu had settled on his chest and he scratched the rodent's head softly. "So... Misty brought me here to you. Where is she? And what is this place? I feel like I'm underground."

"Bingo. This is an old bunker Cerulean's naval forces used back in the war days with Johto. Been abandoned for who knows how long, so it

was a perfect place for me to hide out."

"Hide out? What're you hiding from?"

"Now *that's* a long story. Let's just say there's some people called 'Team Rocket' keen on gettin' my help for something, but I refused. They don't like bein' told 'no'."

Ash stiffened at the mention of Team Rocket and recalled his harrowing escape from Mt. Moon. "Team Rocket's the ones who attacked me in Mt. Moon. They're why I got so beat up. And I'm pretty sure they're behind the cave-in you were talking about. They were setting off bombs in there."

Bill raised a hand to his chin. "Hm, that's no good. Sure explains why Misty kept seein' 'em in the city. But she said they split a couple weeks ago, didn't leave a trace."

"I stumbled into what I think was one of their abandoned labs or somethin'." Ash swallowed at the memory. "There was a lotta weird machinery, and a ton of old blood."

Bill shook his head. "No good at all. That lot's no good, ya know what I mean? Listen, Ash. Can I call you Ash? I'm no doctor, but you got burned up real bad. Looks like whatever hit you melted through your armor and kinda roasted you inside it." Bill wiggled his fingers, mimicking fire.

The mention of his burns incited a flare of agony down his back and arms, and Ash had to bite his tongue to keep from groaning. His eyes watered, and he reached for the glass of water again.

"Pretty shocking, too, since from what I could tell, that armor was the new Brigandine model," Bill prattled on. "Shoulda been flame retardant enough to protect ya from first- and second-degree burns. Whatever hit ya packed a lot more heat than the armor could take, I reckon. Anyway, that Potion's enough to dull the pain a bit and keep you stable, but it ain't gonna do you a whole lotta good by itself. It's all I got out here. Ran outta supplies recently, and Misty was gonna get me more until she ran into you."

"Misty," Ash repeated once he finished off the water. "Is she coming back?"

Bill chuckled. "You bet. She'll wanna know you're awake after havin' to haul your passed out body all the way here. Girl's strong as a

Taurus, let me tell you. But right now, you gotta rest."

"Wait, my Wartortle was pretty beat up. You don't have anything that could help him, do you?"

"Wartortle? Hmm, I might have some more Potions lyin' around. Misty'll be back with more supplies, too, but you oughta take your Pokémon to the Center once you're better, got it?"

"Got it. Hey, thanks for helping me, Bill. I'm pretty sure I woulda died out there."

Bill put up his hands. "Don't thank me, I just live here."

Ash suddenly remembered Gary and Ivy, and he tried to sit up again. "Hey, you didn't happen to come across my friends, did you? We got separated in the cave-in."

"Hm, can't say I did. I don't leave the bunker, though. Misty didn't say anything, but you can ask her when she gets back. She'n her sisters take turns patrollin' this area for me, so maybe she ran into your friends."

Ash's heart sank as his imagination entertained increasingly wild and gruesome scenarios that could have befallen Gary and Ivy.

They're tough, he reassured himself. *They wouldn't go down so easy, especially not together.*

But given his own status and why he'd ended up this way in the first place, he couldn't help the nagging worry and doubt. What if they'd run into Team Rocket and had to fight off other aberrations, like he had?

"Listen, Ash," Bill said. "I know ya must be worried, but you should get some rest. Misty'll be back later, then you can ask her whatever ya want. You'll be safe here until then. Deal?"

Ash couldn't get the thought of Gary and Ivy still stuck in Mt. Moon or worse out of his head, but the pain in his back side was sapping what little energy he had and making it hard to think straight. Pikachu looked up at him, the worry clear in its beady, black eyes.

"Sure," Ash said softly as he lay back.

"I'll just refill the water..."

Bill's voice trailed off as exhaustion and pain inundated Ash's senses and swept him away to oblivion.

Misty led the way deeper into the woods off the beaten path on Route Twenty-Five. Her Vaporeon trotted alongside her, but it barely made ripples in the shallow marsh water as it moved. Gary and Ivy followed at a short distance.

"Do you think we can trust her?" Ivy whispered.

Gary eyed her injured hand. It had been flayed to ribbons, and while putting pressure on it had stopped the bleeding, he had to give her credit for going on like nothing was amiss. Swallowing he said, "I dunno. But she did help us against Team Rocket."

Ivy's expression darkened. "I shoulda killed Jessie when I had the chance. They'll report us now, and things might get a little harder when we run into Team Rocket in the future."

Gary said nothing to that, but he let his hand rest against the row of Pokéballs at his belt. From what he'd seen of Ivy's knife fight with Jessie, she very well could have killed the Rocket Grunt. But there was no way of confirming it. He wasn't sure how he felt about that, about how easily Ivy dismissed the issue.

You'd probably be dead if it wasn't for her, a small voice in his head reminded him.

"I hope Ash didn't run into those clowns," Ivy went on. "Honestly, I don't think we would've made it out alive if Misty hadn't shown up when she did."

The water receded slowly, and soon Gary and Ivy found themselves on solid, if not a little mushy, ground. Dead leaves and mulch had collected on the ground, soggy, and made soft squelching noises underfoot. The place had a dank smell that lingered in the air, stagnant and sticky. When Misty stopped suddenly, she turned back to face them.

"Here we are," she announced.

Gary and Ivy looked around, confused.

"Where's 'here', exactly?" Gary asked.

Misty smirked and kneeled down. Buried under the mulch was a latch to a trap door, which she hefted open with a grunt of effort. A dark, subterranean passage opened up in the ground, and the three of them peered down it.

"You guys go first so I can secure the trap door."

Ivy and Gary exchanged a look before Ivy selected one of the Pokéballs at her belt and released Houndour. The black canine growled as soon as it laid eyes on Vaporeon.

"So, I'm gonna take a wild guess and assume that Umbreon I found with your friend belongs to you," Misty said.

Ivy smiled brightly, and Gary repressed a shiver at the sight. "You bet."

"Uh-huh." Misty crossed her arms. "Well, shall we?"

"Absolutely."

Ivy squatted and used her good hand to lower herself down the ladder embedded in the wall of the passage. She cradled Houndour to her chest with her injured arm. It was a straight shoot down about thirty feet, but with one bum hand she couldn't climb down the normal way. Gary watched as she hooked her leg around the ladder's side pole and slid swiftly down.

"Well...that's one way to do it," Misty said.

Gary went next, but he used the ladder normally. With one last glance at Misty and Vaporeon staring down at him, he disappeared into the darkness and made his way down, blind. It only took a couple minutes to climb to the bottom, and when he heard a resounding click like a deadbolt sliding into place, he guessed Misty was not far behind him.

The passage was low-ceilinged and damp. Water dripped from the ceiling and gathered in small puddles on the concrete floor. Gary wasn't claustrophobic by nature, but even he hoped to be out of the tunnel as soon as possible. Dim wall sconces offered meager light, just enough to see a couple yards ahead until the next wall sconce. Houndour was busy sniffing the air and taking in the new smells. Misty touched down on the ground soon after, having recalled Vaporeon.

"This way."

She led them down the passage for about five minutes and around two sharp bends until they came to a metal door reminiscent of a bank safe. There was a metal chain hanging from the door that disappeared inside it. Misty pulled on the wooden handle, and a shrill ringing sound echoed beyond the door. A minute or so later, someone slid open the eye hole and peeked through.

"Misty," a man's voice said. "You're back! Did ya get those supplies?"

"You bet," Misty said. "And I brought company, too. Don't worry, I checked them out."

The man on the other side squinted beyond her, but the eye hole only allowed for so much vantage. "All right, y'all stand back."

The eye hole slid shut and the man released the various deadbolts holding the door closed. It slowly swung open, and the three trainers stepped back to give it room. The man on the other side stepped aside to let them pass.

"Howdy," he greeted Gary and Ivy.

"Bill, this is Ivy and Gary," Misty said. "I found them fighting off a couple of Rocket Agents not far from here."

Bill frowned. "They really are a persistent bunch. Well, any foe of Team Rocket's is a friend of mine."

"Bill," Gary said, holding out his hand. "I'm Gary Oak. I believe you know my grandfather."

Bill's eyes widened. "I thought you looked a little familiar! You're Sam's grandson. Gosh, the resemblance is uncanny. Well, come on in! Misty, you don't have to worry about these two. Sam'n I go way back."

Misty nodded, satisfied. "Where's our friend?"

"Oh, he woke up for a bit while you were gone. Said his name was Ash Ketchum."

"Where is he?" Ivy said. "Is he okay? Where'd you find him?"

Bill motioned for them to follow. "This way. He's all right, but he really needs some better treatment."

Gary, Ivy, and Misty followed Bill deeper into the bunker. The walls were made of concrete, and metal piping lined the ceiling carrying gas

and water to supply energy to the place. There was a low hum emanating from somewhere, and Gary guessed it was a generator. The accommodations were nothing to write home about. Bill led them through the foyer and into a wide room filled with machinery, including an enormous computer and various lab equipment reminiscent of Professor Oak's lab in Pallet Town. Beyond that was a small kitchen and combined dining room with only the bare essentials. There were a few dirty dishes in the silver sink, and a small, steel table with two chairs sat opposite the cast-iron stove. The door at the back of the kitchen led to the living quarters, and true to its bunker form, there were several rooms stocked with identical beds.

"I set Ash up in one of the private quarters so he could get some rest," Bill explained in his lilting accent. "Poor kid's been through a real doozy."

The room Ash was in was small and a little cramped, but Bill had set up an IV drip for him and there were extra blankets on the bed to keep him warm. A ratty throw rug sat on the floor and gave the otherwise prison-like room a little more of a homey quality.

"Ash," Gary said as he walked around the bed and examined his friend. "Hey, can you hear me?"

Pikachu and Umbreon, who had been snoozing on the bed with Ash, perked up when Bill and the others entered the room. Umbreon leaped off the bed and rubbed up against Ivy's legs. Houndour pawed the ground and panted, happy to see Umbreon again. Ivy scooped up the black feline with her good arm, and Umbreon nuzzled her cheek.

"Good job," she said. "Really good job."

Ash slowly came to with all the commotion. "What?" he said, groggy.

"Ash, hey," Gary said, unable to contain a smile. "Ivy and I are here now."

"Huh?" Ash tried to sit up, but apparently forgot he was in extreme pain and hissed.

"Here." Misty shrugged off the pack she carried and selected a bottle from inside. Then she unzipped the IV bag feeding Ash and dumped the contents inside. The liquid was clear and viscous, and it glowed as though with a light all its own.

"What is that?" Ivy asked.

"Full Heal," Misty said as she zipped the bag back up and repositioned the IV stand. "This should take care of the burns, and time resting will restore his energy. It won't be safe to move him for another day at least, though."

"Misty?" Ash said.

Misty looked a little surprised and gave Ash her attention. "Hi there. Glad to see you're finally awake."

Ash gave her a goofy grin. "Thanks to you, I hear. Why'd you help me?"

"You'd rather I left you to die out there? I almost did. That Pikachu didn't want to let me anywhere near you. I had to have my Starmie put it to sleep."

Pikachu squeaked as though it knew they were talking about it, and Ash scratched it behind the ear.

"Well, thanks a lot."

Misty smirked. "You already said that."

"Did I?"

"Yeah."

Gary cleared his throat. "Anyway, Ash, you better rest until that Full Heal gets back up and running."

"Yes," Misty said. "Everybody out."

"Hey, wait." Ash winced as he shifted in bed and disturbed his many wounds. "There's something you guys gotta know. I ran into Team Rocket in the cave."

Ash briefly explained that he encountered Jessie and James, the culprits behind the bombs that set off the multiple cave-ins, and their self-proclaimed task of covering up all evidence of a Rocket lab. He also told them about the mutant Rhydon and handed Gary Wartortle's Pokéball.

"See if you can fix him up. Wartortle saved my life in there. I want him to be okay."

Gary nodded. "No problem."

Ivy patted Ash on the shoulder lightly. "I'm happy you're okay. We were a little worried about you."

"Aw, just a little?"

Bill, who'd remained mostly silent during the exchange, chimed in, "Hm, Ivy, right? That hand of yours looks like it's seen better days. I've got a medical kit in the kitchen if you'll follow me."

With that, Misty ushered everyone out of the room. She caught Ash's eye as she closed the door, and he smiled sleepily. In the kitchen, Bill went about preparing coffee and procuring antibiotics and bandages for Ivy's hand. Misty disappeared into the lab and returned shortly after with two more chairs, wooden, and the four of them sat at the small kitchen table.

"Bill, sorry to bother you, but I'm gonna need a needle and thread," Ivy said. "These gashes won't heal normally by themselves, and I'd rather not waste more of your provisions."

Misty dug around in the pack she'd been carrying and fished out a sewing kit with a red cross emblazoned upon the lid. "This should do the trick."

"Thanks."

Gary watched in morbid fascination as Ivy cleaned her wounds, barely flinching, and cut a measured length of coarse, black thread with her teeth. When she tried to thread the needle, though, she began to have problems.

"Give it here." He didn't wait for her to comply and merely snatched the needle and thread from her good hand. Once he'd looped the thread through the needle, he paused to consider the situation. "Show me your hand."

"I can do it."

"With your left hand? You'll only make it worse."

There was a flicker of defiance in her bright, blue eyes that Gary didn't miss, but he wasn't about to take no for an answer.

"I've done this a lot before. I know what I'm doing," he said a little more gently.

Silently, Ivy held out her mutilated hand. Gary gently pinched the torn flaps of skin together and began stitching her up. She bit her lip, but she didn't make a sound.

"So I guess you're no stranger to pain," Misty said as she observed the whole scene in silence. "I think it's time you guys tell me what you're doing here. You're not from Cerulean, and we don't get many travelers. Most people aren't stupid enough to risk coming through Mt. Moon or Rock Tunnel."

Bill returned with the brewed coffee just then and four mugs. He took the liberty of pouring. "I apologize, but I'm fresh outta cream and sugar, folks. Don't get too many luxuries livin' underground."

Gary worked quickly and efficiently, like he'd sewn up dozens of maimed hands in the past. In fact, he'd gotten plenty of practice during his year of training with Chuck in Cianwood City. He could feel Ivy's gaze on him and her silent questioning, but he kept his focus on the task.

"I can answer that," Ivy said in response to Misty's question. The slight strain in her voice as she tried to ignore the burning in her hand did not go unnoticed by the other three people in the room. "We're on a mission to put an end to Team Rocket once and for all."

Bill choked on his coffee and ended up spilling some on his pants. "Oh, darnit all," he muttered as he got up and searched for a towel.

"Is that so?" Misty asked. She took a sip of her coffee and rested her chin on her hands as she leaned forward over the table. "Kinda like how you 'put an end' to those two goons in the woods?"

Gary poked Ivy with the needle by accident as Misty's words incited a flush of anger, and she hissed.

"No," Ivy said, a little more forcefully than she'd intended now that she was bleeding again. "We're actually gathering support. The point is, no one here or in Johto's had the balls to stand up to Team Rocket before, and things're just getting worse. I'm sure you've heard about the rising prices in Pewter, for one."

Misty made a sour face. "I'm aware. Even here in Cerulean they were trying to bribe their way into the municipality. They're good with politics and legal work, and that's dangerous in the wrong hands. In the end, only brute force and intimidation seem to work."

"That's exactly what I'm saying. You talk like Team Rocket's gone from Cerulean."

"They never really arrived. They did what they've been trying to do in all the big cities, but Cerulean's kind of a bubble community. We don't mind visitors, but we don't like outsiders coming in for a more permanent stay. Team Rocket couldn't really dig their claws in, and they sort of gave up."

"Not entirely," Bill interjected. He'd found a towel and returned to the table.

"No, not entirely, as you've just seen."

Gary finished stitching Ivy's hand and, without warning, dumped more antiseptic on it.

"*Ow*, fuck," Ivy swore. "What crawled up your ass all of a sudden?"

"Sorry." He then quickly wrapped up her hand like nothing was the matter. When he finished, he looked up at Bill and Misty. "Not that I'm not grateful for the help, but I've got a few questions of my own."

Bill perked up. "O' course. You know, Sam always had the best things to say about you, Gary. Although, I don't know how he'd feel about you runnin' around gettin' mixed up with Team Rocket. At least, not without gettin' mixed up himself."

Gary fished around his pocket and pulled out his blue Pokédex to set on the table.

"What's that?" Misty asked.

Bill gasped and snatched the computer with both hands. "Incredible! He finally finished it!"

"This is a Pokédex," Gary explained. "It syncs with a database back in Pallet Town to pull up biological information on whatever Pokémon's image it captures. There's also a way to edit the existing information. That's what Gramps sent Ash and me to do."

Bill had figured out how to open the Pokédex and turned it on, scanning through entries Gary had populated on his journey thus far. "Mm, yes, and that's the point of your travels, I imagine. I suppose that's why Sam was okay with sending you on your own. It makes sense now—good god! Is that an Aerodactyl?!"

"What?" Misty leaned over the table to see the entry, but Bill was so absorbed in the little computer that she only got a partial image.

"About that," Gary said. "Some of my Pokémon are pretty beat up from the fight with Jessie and James. Ash also mentioned his Wartortle needs healing."

"I brought extra Hyper Potions from town," Misty said, already going to her pack and rifling through it until she came upon the right bottles. "There's some healing tanks in the lab."

Gary and Misty wandered back into the lab briefly to get the Hyper Potions set up with the injured Pokémon. Ivy just stared at Bill in silence as he continued to scroll through the Pokédex entries and test its functionality like a kid in a candy shop. By the time Gary and Misty got back, he was so excited he couldn't remain seated.

"This is just magnificent," Bill gushed. "When we'd tossed around ideas for the Pokédex project, I had no idea the end product would turn out so well. Sam's really outdone himself with this one. It might just be the most important invention of his career!"

"You knew about the Pokédex?" Gary asked when he returned with Misty.

"You bet! Sam and I'd talked about creatin' a kinda Pokémon encyclopedia for years, but we just couldn't figure out how to simultaneously store the information and send it out anywhere in the world in real time. The network challenge was a real doozy, let me tell ya. But I figured out that particular bug, and the rest was all Sam. He gathered all the information he could on Pokémon in Kanto and Johto. It was always a lifelong project, started when he was a kid about your age, maybe a little younger."

"Wait, are you saying Gramps traveled around Kanto and Johto when he was my age?"

"Wow," Ivy said. "No wonder his Pokémon were so powerful."

Bill nodded. "Yep, before the war it was easy to go between the continents. He was quite the trainer in his youth, from what I gather, but his true passion was always science. Anyway, I'm surprised he never told ya. If he wanted, he coulda been one of the Elite Four, but it wasn't his calling."

Gary's eyes fell. "He never told me any of that."

Ivy sensed his hesitation and spoke up. "So you're some kinda scientist, too, Bill? What do you do?"

"That's right. I'm a tech guy, but I've always been deeply interested in Pokémon, too. Especially evolution. Used to work with David Elm back in college, actually. But that was years ago, o' course."

"You mean *Professor* Elm?"

"You know him? He's pretty famous in Johto, but I don't meet many folks around these parts too familiar with his work."

"I met him once. He was a good man."

"You said you deal in evolution," Gary interjected. "Maybe you can answer me something then."

Bill returned the Pokédex to Gary and sipped his coffee. "I can sure try. What's on your mind?"

"My Nidoking. He was a Nidorino just yesterday when we were passing through Mt. Moon, and today he's a fully evolved Nidoking, and he's a couple heads taller than your average Nidoking. I've never heard of such a thing happening."

"That's impossible," Misty said. "There's no way an evolution like that could happen so fast. Even Bugs take at least a week to evolve into their final forms."

"You saw Nidoking yourself. Obviously, it's possible. What I wanna know is how."

Bill thought about that for a moment. "You say he was a Nidorino just yesterday?"

"That's right."

"Did anything unusual happen between then and now? Something directly connected to Nidorino, that is."

"...That Moonstone," Ivy said. "Nidorino got out of his Pokéball on his own when we found it."

"Yeah, but he was fine after."

"A Moonstone, you say?" Bill set down his mug and steepled his hands. "Now *that's* intriguing."

"What do you mean?" Misty asked. "What's so special about it?"

"A whole mess of stuff, actually. How can I explain this?" Bill paused to collect his thoughts. "Moonstones're a special type of gem that hold vast amounts of energy in very small, condensed volumes. Some say Moonstones come from the moon, but o' course we have no way of proving that.

"Unfortunately, I ain't a specialist on stones, so I can't speak too deeply on the subject. But the general theory is that there are some stones, like the Moonstone, that basically catapult certain types of Pokémon into the next evolutionary stage, like your Nidoking. The idea is that all that pent up energy merges with the Pokémon—Nidorino, in your case—and creates a cellular explosion!" Bill pantomimed an explosion with his hands. "The Pokémon evolves faster than normal, and all the energy it got from the Moonstone now belongs to it. You said your Nidoking's pretty big for its species, right? I reckon that's because all that Moonstone energy had to go somewhere. Did it display any unexpected feats of strength?"

"Does throwing a seventeen-foot-long Arbok about fifty feet with its tail count?" Ivy said.

Bill lit up. "Incredible! That sounds about right. Now, let me tell ya, there haven't been *too* many confirmed cases that I know about. Pokémon just evolve naturally on their own in time. But there have been cases in the past where certain Elemental Stones, as they're called, accelerated the process and gave the Pokémon a super power boost. You've heard o' Blaine, the Cinnabar Gym Leader, right?"

Ivy, Gary, and Misty all nodded.

"Well, he's got a Ninetales as big as a Rapidash! Claims his Vulpix was diggin' around Mt. Cinnabar and came back with a Fire Stone shard in its mouth. That night, poof! By morning, he had a Ninetales bigger'n any you ever did see. It's all a really fascinating field in evolutionary research, but like I said, I'm no expert, so I couldn't tell you how it works exactly, or even why. I hear there're other kinds of Elemental Stones out there, too, some that can only be found in certain places, just like y'all found that Moonstone."

"Wow," Misty said. "So your Nidoking must be pretty strong if that's all true. Still, it looked like it was having a tough time with Arbok."

"That was my fault," Gary said. "I had no idea Nidorino had evolved. I didn't know how to react in the middle of a fight."

"So, Bill," Ivy said. "This is all super interesting, but I'm curious about why Team Rocket's so interested in you."

"Ah, the bane of my existence. Sadly, when you're as brilliant as me, ya get a lotta unwanted attention. Team Rocket approached me about my networking tech, the same kind I built for the Pokédex. They were interested in that kinda high speed, go-anywhere communication. Dunno what for, though. Anyway, I said no and they got mad. The rest y'already know."

Misty sat back in her chair. "And that's why it's so important for me to make sure Bill stays hidden until I can figure out how to deal with the Team Rocket issue once and for all."

"Oh, you mean put an end to them on your own?" Ivy quipped.

Despite himself, Gary couldn't help but smirk at the backhanded remark after Misty had questioned their intentions earlier. She noticed and crossed her arms.

"Fair enough. But I guess it's like you said, *someone* has to do something or no one will."

"Well, folks," Bill said, standing. "I need to get back to work. Discoveries to be made and such. I'll keep an eye on your Pokémon and let ya know when they've recovered. Y'all should stay the night while Ash recovers."

Gary and Ivy thanked Bill for his hospitality, and Misty showed them to some spare beds in the back.

"So Misty," Gary said. "Why'd you take it upon yourself to be Bill's bodyguard?"

Misty unpacked more of the supplies she'd brought back from the city on a shelf near a bed that Gary and Ivy assumed was hers. "It's not just me. My sisters help out, too. I'm just the better trainer among the three of us, so I'm doing more." She paused and added, "By the way, what'd you mean exactly by getting support for your fight against Team Rocket?"

Ivy and Gary exchanged a look, and she gestured to him to explain. He dug his hands into his pockets. "We're basically going to all the Gyms around Kanto and asking the Gym Leaders to help us out. The idea is that if the Gym Leaders all agree, we'll get the geographical scope to weed out Team Rocket and, ideally, convince the Elite Four

to intervene."

Misty raised her eyebrows. "Basically, huh? And what makes you think the Gym Leaders'll even listen to you? Gyms serve narrow jurisdictions, and most of the Gym Leaders don't give a shit about anything or anyone on the outside."

"Well, we already convinced Brock to help."

Misty stopped what she was doing and gave them her full attention. "Really? Brock's a reasonable guy, but even he wouldn't normally agree to something so risky. Especially not with the trouble Pewter's in right now. How'd you convince him?"

"I kicked his ass in a Pokémon battle," Ivy said. "After that, he was *much* more accommodating."

Misty laughed. "You're telling me you beat Brock, the Pewter *Gym Leader*, in a Pokémon battle? You can't seriously expect me to believe you."

Ivy fished the Boulder Badge out of her jacket pocket and tossed it to Misty to examine. "What is it with you Kantoans? You think these Gym Leaders are invincible or something."

Misty examined the Boulder Badge for a moment, frowning. "This is genuine. Unbelievable, you're really not making this up."

"No, we're not," Gary said. "And once Ash can travel again, we'll go talk to the Gym Leader in Cerulean and ask for her support, too."

Misty tossed the Boulder Badge back to Ivy, who pocketed it once more. "You mean you'll hold her at knifepoint until she agrees, is that it?"

"No, we don't intend to break any laws or cause trouble. Besides, I've met Gym Leader Serena a couple times when I was younger. I'm sure she'll hear us out."

Misty set her jaw. "I guess you wouldn't know, not being from around here, but Gym Leader Serena died almost a year ago. Cancer."

Gary frowned. "I didn't know that. I'm sorry, that must've been hard for Cerulean."

"It was. Still is, even with a new Gym Leader picking up the slack."

Ivy looked between the two of them. "In that case, if the new Gym Leader doesn't wanna talk to us, a Pokémon battle should get their attention. If this one's anything like Brock, their own arrogance will do our job for us."

Misty tapped two fingers over her lips, thinking. "Well, I think you'll find Cerulean's new Gym Leader to be interested in getting rid of Team Rocket in general. But I gotta say, from what I saw earlier, you guys don't seem anywhere near skilled enough to beat one, let alone two Gym Leaders. I doubt anyone would want put all their money on you."

"What makes you say that?" Gary asked.

"Because *I'm* the Cerulean City Gym Leader, and I'm *so* not impressed."

The trio spent the night at Bill's along with Misty, and by the next day, Ash's condition had improved considerably. He was still in pain and physically drained of energy, but his burns had almost completely healed. Gary and Ivy filled him in on what they had discussed with Bill and Misty while he slept, and Ash expressed his shock and excitement over the revelation about Nidoking.

"Dude, that's crazy," he said. "Nidoking are s'posed to be really strong, but they take for*ever* to evolve. Didn't Professor Oak's Nidoqueen only evolve like fifteen years after he caught her as a Nidoran or something?"

"That's the story," Gary said.

"Huh. Well, cool. Now we got Nidoking."

"So Ash, think you can make the trip back to Cerulean?" Ivy asked.

Ash sat up in bed and stretched tentatively. He winced as the movement tugged at the still tender skin on his healing back. "I'm getting stir crazy in this bunker, to be honest."

"Good." Everyone turned to see Misty leaning in the doorway. "I'll be happy to escort you all back. Then we can see about you convincing me to see things your way."

Ash frowned and looked between Gary and Ivy. "What's she talking about?"

Gary sighed. "Ash, meet the Cerulean City Gym Leader."

Ash gaped. "No way, for real?"

Misty narrowed her eyes. "Why? Is it so hard to believe?"

"Nah, it's just I didn't think the Gym Leader would be the cute girl who saved my sorry ass."

Misty flushed and crossed her arms.

"Well," Ivy said a little too cheerfully. "I'm gonna go repack my bag."

She got out of there, leaving Gary alone with Ash and Misty. Ash looked between Gary and Misty, a confused look on his face. There was a pause as Gary looked up like he remembered something, then stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"Right, I...better go help her. Hard to pack with one hand and all..."

He backed out the door, and when he was through the doorway he turned away and quickly disappeared around the corner.

"What got into them all of a sudden?" Ash wondered aloud.

Misty laughed nervously. "Who knows?"

Ash put it out of his mind and swung his legs off the bed. Misty went to his side and held out an arm for him to take. He did, gratefully.

"Thanks. I think I can walk okay, but I dunno about outside."

He noticed that Misty was just slightly taller than him when he stood up to his full height. Her red-orange hair framed her face and ended in a short, low ponytail at the back of her neck. He caught her gaze and held it for a moment, remembering the last time he'd looked into those eyes on the brink of death, and grinned.

"Bet this is the last thing you wanna be doing as a Gym Leader, huh? Who's running the Gym while you're here, by the way?"

"Oh, my older sisters, Violet and Daisy. When we get back, I'll ask them to come back out here and keep an eye on Bill."

"So the Gym's a family business?"

Misty's expression fell. "You could say that. My mother, Serena, was

the previous Gym Leader. I took over when she passed away."

"Oh... Shit, I'm sorry. I shouldna said—"

"It's okay, you guys didn't know. Really, it seems like ages ago now. And my sisters and me, we're really close. I'm proud to be the Gym Leader after my mom."

Ash let Misty guide him out of the room and into the lab so he could conserve as much of his meager energy as possible.

"Ah, Ash, you're lookin' a lick or two better," Bill greeted him. He had a large mug of coffee in his hand. "I expect you'll all be headin' back to Cerulean now?"

Misty nodded. "I'll send my sisters up later today. I want to make sure there aren't any more Rocket Agents in the area."

"Oh, Ash, before you go, there's something I wanted to ask of ya."

Bill set down his coffee and led them to the rejuvenation tanks Misty and Gary had used the night before. Only a single ball—an Ultra Ball—remained floating in one of the three tanks. Bill pressed a few buttons on the keypad and the medicated water drained slowly. Once the tank had emptied, he retrieved the Ultra Ball and held it out for Ash.

"Wow, an Ultra Ball," Misty said. "Those aren't cheap to come by."

"Yes, well, I s'pose I had to use it at some point or another. Just before I came to the mainland, I spent some time at Mt. Ember way down south. Actually, that's where I met Gym Leader Blaine, who'd been doin' some investigating there on his own. Said he was lookin' for clues about some ancient Pokémon or something. That's how I knew about his Ninetales and got curious about those Elemental Stones. Anyway, long story short, we got into a bit of unexpected trouble and by sheer dumb luck, I ended up savin' his life. I ain't no trainer, so don't get me wrong, but Clefairy and I've been together for years, so she was a big help. Anyway, Blaine just couldn't believe a guy like *me* ended up comin' to his rescue back then, so he gave me this little guy as kind of a thank-you."

Bill threw the Ultra Ball and from within the bright flash, a lizard-like creature with glowing, red and orange scales, yellow cat eyes, and a long tail tipped with a flickering flame appeared on all fours. Curious about the unfamiliar people in its midst, the Pokémon rose up on its

haunches and came up to Ash's waist in height.

"Whoa, a Charmeleon!" Ash said.

Pikachu eyed Charmeleon warily from Ash's shoulder and began to crackle with electricity. Charmeleon, sensing the challenge, growled and released pungent, black smoke from in between inch-long, serrated teeth.

"Oh boy," Bill said. "Charmeleon, come on, now, cut that out, please, will ya?" To Ash and Misty he said, "Ya see? He's all fight, like most Charmeleon and their line. I can't do much with him cooped up down here, and it's not like he makes a very good assistant. I noticed your friends both have Fire-type Pokémon on their teams already, so I was hopin' you'd oblige me by taking Charmeleon here along with ya?"

"S-Seriously? You're just gonna hand him over like that?"

"Well, sure. I feel bad keepin' him down here, and between us, Charmeleon's not the most obedient Pokémon in the world. Maybe you'll have better luck. I just don't have the time to train him, ya know?"

Ash kneeled down, and Misty held onto his hand to help him maintain his balance. Pikachu hopped onto the ground and continued to glare at Charmeleon. The orange lizard swished its tail, drawing light paths in the air with the flame on the tip.

"Hey, buddy," Ash said. "How's it going?"

Charmeleon hissed and released more smoke. Bill backed away in trepidation, clutching Charmeleon's Ultra Ball to his chest.

"Ash," Misty warned, backing up a step and letting her hand hover over Starmie's Pokéball.

"It's okay." Ash let go of her hand and steadied himself in a crouched position with a hand on the floor. "I can tell you like to fight."

As if understanding, Charmeleon snapped its jaws. Sparkling cinders floated in the air around its mouth before fizzling into nothing. Ash smirked.

"Yeah, you do. If it's a fight you want, I think I can help you out." He held out a hand to Charmeleon.

"Ash!" Misty hissed. She drew Starmie's Pokéball and got ready to throw it for backup.

"It's okay." Ash showed Charmeleon his palm, unafraid. "What d'you say, Charmeleon? Wanna get outta this place with me?"

There was a tense silence as Misty held her breath in anticipation of Charmeleon possibly lashing out and attacking. But to her utter shock, the orange lizard lowered itself to all fours and peered up at Ash. Its pupils were shrunken to vertical slits as it carefully watched for any sign of treachery, but it didn't move to attack.

Ash let his fingers brush Charmeleon's snout, which was rough and dry to the touch. It radiated a warmth that heated the air around it without even trying.

You'll be a handful, he thought to himself, looking forward to the challenge.

Slowly, he retracted his hand and gestured to Bill. "Toss me the Ultra Ball, will you?"

Bill did as he was asked a little too eagerly. Ash caught it easily and waved it in front of Charmeleon's face. Its yellow eyes tracked the ball's movement.

"Return," Ash said, clicking the release button.

Charmeleon disappeared in a flash of white light back into the Ultra Ball, and Ash fitted it to his belt between Ivysaur and Munchlax. He stood up with a grunt of effort and put a hand on his sore back.

"What the hell was that?" Misty said, incredulous.

"That was my new Charmeleon. Pretty cool, huh?"

She crossed her arms, uncomfortable. "No, I mean, how did you cow it like that? Charmeleon looked about ready to fry the closest thing in its path, and you managed to calm it down and even touch it. What the hell was that?"

"I dunno, I guess Charmeleon just understood that he'd have a better time cooperating than fighting."

Bill deemed it safe to approach again and smiled, the relief evident in his eyes. "Thanks, Ash. You're really doin' me a favor by taking

Charmeleon."

"I should be thanking you. Now I've got Wartortle, Ivysaur, and Charmeleon. I always wanted to catch all three species, but Charmeleon's line isn't easy to find."

Shortly thereafter, Gary and Ivy joined them in the lab with all the packs and the group of four bid Bill goodbye before setting off at a sedate pace back down Route Twenty-Five toward Cerulean. As usual, Aerodactyl, now recovered from the beating James's Victreebel had doled out, rode on Gary's shoulders. They reached the marsh just minutes after leaving the bunker behind and had to suffer the unpleasant, mucky water. No one was taking any chances after the ambush yesterday, so the four trainers were flanked by Gary's Golduck, Misty's Vaporeon and a Kingler with a truly fearsome dominant pincer, and Ash's newly healed Wartortle. Pikachu, of course, kept a vigilant eye from atop Ash's left shoulder.

Ash moved slowly, still banged up from his escape from Mt. Moon, so he lagged behind with Misty while Gary and Ivy stayed ahead. Ash didn't mind, and Wartortle hung back with the slower Kingler and Vaporeon bringing up the rear, but just looking at his friends putting a bit of distance between themselves and him was enough to remind him that he would be no help to anyone like this. Misty seemed to sense his frustration as she helped him walk and eyed him askance.

"Something wrong?"

Ash shook his head and plastered a bright smile onto his face. "Nah, just a little embarrassed that I'm moving so slow. Your Kingler could probably beat me in a race right now, to be honest."

Misty smiled back. "You'd be surprised at how quick Kingler can be underwater."

The water slowly became deeper as the swamp gave way to Route Twenty-Five's signature mangrove canals. Misty and Ash waded up to their waists and Ash sighed in relief as the cool water soothed his raw skin through his clothes. Kingler just kept walking until it disappeared completely underwater. Ash could see it crawling ahead through the mostly clear water, its beady eye stalks peering among the submerged mangrove roots in search of wild Pokémon. Wartortle was elated to be in the water and made a game out of trying to chase Vaporeon in circles. It spit a weak stream of water at Ash and Misty as they slowly hunkered along.

"Hey!" Ash swatted the water with his hand and splashed Wartortle back, but the blue turtle was fast in the water and disappeared below the surface before Ash could splash it. It reappeared a few feet away, as though daring Ash to try to hit it again.

Misty laughed. "I've never seen such a playful Wartortle before. My sister Violet has a Blastoise, and it's so stoic all the time."

"Blastoise, huh? So you and your sisters all train Water types?"

Misty shrugged. "My family's always been partial, I guess. They're really useful around these parts and Mt. Moon, too. Every once in awhile we find Graveler and Rhyhorn that wander out of the deeper caves looking for food, and they can be really dangerous to the citizens, especially since we don't have a huge perimeter wall like Pewter."

"Makes sense."

Pikachu was tugging on Ash's hair to keep its balance as it tried to follow Wartortle and Vaporeon darting around in the water, perhaps eager to join the fun but unwilling to jump into water this deep. With so many Pokémon on guard, they had no problems getting through Route Twenty-Five, much to Ash's relief. As they arrived on higher ground and left the deeper canals behind to get to Route Twenty-Four and the bridge connecting the wilds to Cerulean City, Ash told Misty about what had happened in Pallet Town.

"Oh my god, that's awful. Is your mom gonna be okay?"

"I hope so. Brock promised she'd get the best treatment at the Pewter hospital."

"Brock sure is doing a lot for you guys."

"Yeah, well, Ivy didn't really give him a choice." He chuckled at the memory. "And Brock's a good guy, anyway. He knew all along that Team Rocket was bad news; he just didn't know what to do about them."

"Mm."

"What about you? Are you gonna help us out?"

They made it to the bridge, and Misty recalled Kingler. Ash followed her example and recalled Wartortle. Only Pikachu and Vaporeon

remained on guard.

"It's not that I don't want to help you guys," Misty said evasively. "And no offense, but I don't know if you guys can actually accomplish what you're trying to do. I get that Brock acknowledged you, and that's a big deal, but I haven't seen much to convince me that you're worth putting my city at risk by taking an active stand against Team Rocket. Not when I feel like I'm still picking up the pieces after my mom passed."

"Wow, you really know how to let a guy down gently."

"I'm sorry. I just have to think about Cerulean. It's not like anyone else will."

Ash thought about that. "That's the whole problem, though, isn't it? All the cities're divided. Brock didn't wanna help us with the injured people in Pallet Town at first 'cause of this stupid jurisdictional issue, not 'cause he's a jerk or something."

"It's kind of sad when you put it that way, but things've always been like that ever since the war with Johto ended. In the war, the Gyms were so focused on protecting themselves that they didn't send help to their neighbors, and a lotta people and Pokémon suffered because of it. After the fighting stopped, the isolationism sorta just became the norm. No one wanted to feel like they had to rely on outside help ever again.

"I only became Gym Leader about a year ago when my mom got sick, but even in that short amount of time, I got used to the fact that no one gives a shit about you and your problems if there's nothing in it for them. It's just the way the Gyms operate. Take care of your own, screw everyone else."

"Man, seriously? That's so fucked up."

"Well, what am I supposed to do? It's not like I can change things. I got enough on my plate just worrying about Cerulean. I can't think about everyone else, too."

Ash stopped walking. They were almost across the bridge, and Gary and Ivy had stopped ahead to wait for them. "Yeah, you can. *We* can. I didn't mention this before, but this mission we're on? It wasn't even ours to begin with. Ivy's the one who showed up determined to do something about Team Rocket all by herself. Crazy, right? But then Gary and I realized it'd be crazier not to help her after what happened

to Pallet Town. And Brock realized he'd be crazy not to help given everything that's been happening in Pewter. Think about. If we can get all the Gym Leaders on board, that's suddenly a ton of people. People with power. And all of a sudden, things're changing."

Misty's gaze fell. "It's not that simple."

"Actually, it really is. You're a Gym Leader. If you decided to do something, the people of Cerulean would follow you. They trust you and depend on you to protect them, just like they trusted your mother before you. That's how it works, right?" Ash was so caught up in the moment that he took her shoulders in his hands and pulled them closer so he had her undivided attention. "Misty, you're one of the only people in Kanto who actually *can* change things."

Misty stared at him in shock, broth from their close proximity and Ash's fervor. Her throat ran dry and she couldn't summon the words to deny him. She couldn't even think of a good reason to deny him.

"I..."

Ash grinned, and the light from the late afternoon sun brought a soft, warm glow to his red eyes that she couldn't look away from. "And if you need any convincing that this is the right way to go, then I'll prove it to you."

"No, you won't," Gary said. He walked toward them with Ivy, expression hard and determined. "*I* will. Gym Leader Misty of Cerulean, I challenge you to a Pokémon battle."

"Wait, what?" Ash said.

"Wait, *what*?" Ivy echoed his confusion.

"You heard me. Sorry Ash, but you can't even walk on your own. I'm calling this Gym Leader."

Ivy gaped. "What the hell happened to 'that's not how things work'? Who even are you right now?"

Gary ignored her and focused on Misty. "You said you weren't impressed with the way I handled Team Rocket the other day, so I'll give you a reason to be impressed. And if I win, you have to agree to help us against Team Rocket when the time comes. No more sitting on the sidelines hoping things'll get better on their own." He paused before adding, "And you have to pay Ivy's and my hospital bill from

the other day. We ran outta there in a hurry, and we're strapped for cash."

Misty flushed with anger and a little embarrassment and crossed her arms defensively. "You've got some nerve."

Gary smirked the way he used to when he and Ash both knew he was right. "What's the matter? Afraid I'll beat you like Ivy beat Brock?"

Aerodactyl squawked excitedly from Gary's back, its tail swishing in anticipation of whatever the energy in the air was leading to.

It was almost nostalgic seeing Gary like this, the way he used to be before he left to train for that year in Johto. It was also strange seeing that long-buried arrogance directed at someone other than Ash, and despite himself, he felt a pang of jealousy.

Misty looked ready to get violent. Her fists were balled and white-knuckled. "Fine. That's how you want to play it? I'm game. You think your Nidoking was hot shit back in the woods, and even Bill said it was a special case or whatever. So let's test that out: your Nidoking against my best. One on one. What do you say?"

Gary narrowed his eyes. Ash remembered that Nidoking had a type disadvantage against Water Pokémon and wondered what Gary might be thinking along those lines. Still, he held out his hand for Misty to shake.

"I say we've got a deal."

"Good. We'll start tomorrow morning, 8 AM sharp. Meet me at the Gym then."

She pushed past Gary and Ivy and headed toward Cerulean City's outskirts with Vaporeon in tow. With Misty gone, the trio huddled together and Ivy lent Ash an arm to lean on.

"So what happens if *you* get arrested?" Ivy said.

"This is different. We know Misty wants to help. Her pride just won't let her," Gary said, patting Aerodactyl's head.

"Gee, I can see your pot and kettle from here."

Gary released a sharp breath. "Seriously, in what universe do you think that's the way that saying goes? Who even taught you that?"

"Whatever, you know what I meant."

Gary let it go, but Ash could tell it pained him to do so. "You can't expect me to let her get away with what she said before. Call it ego if you want. Doesn't change anything."

"Well," Ash said. "You better win, then, 'cause if you don't, you'll be an even bigger moron than you were just now."

Gary selected Nidoking's Pokéball from his belt and turned it over in his hand. "Have a little faith, Ash. I *am* stronger than you, after all."

They reserved a room at the Pokémon Center for the next few days, anticipating that Ash would still need time to get his strength back. Ivy dropped off the Jigglypuff she'd caught with Nurse Joy, who promised to take good care of it. The next morning a little before eight, she and Gary helped Ash walk to the Gym since he insisted on watching.

The area around the Gym was considerably more wild looking than the city proper. It was set up a little bit outside the center to the west so it was closer to Mt. Moon. The river Gary and Ivy had fallen into during their flight from the mountain ran near the Gym and disappeared under it in sections. The land was overrun with marshland where the river flooded it, and there were clusters of Oddish that had buried themselves in the mud to soak up nutrients. Margikarp and Poliwag bumbled along in the shallow water in search of fly larvae to eat.

The Gym itself was a majestic, grey, stone building with floor-to-ceiling glass windows that looked into an indoor section of the river and man-made reservoir system. Like Pewter Gym, it had sections designated as living quarters and storage, but the center of the gym was carved out of the land itself. An enormous stretch of river water dotted with dirt and sand islands and boulders took up most of the Gym proper. Fountains gushed at various locations within the Gym and fed carved out pools too deep to see to the bottoms. It even smelled like a bayou, sweaty and sweet like the beginnings of a sneeze, and Gary could easily imagine the place at night coming alive with singing crickets and fireflies. The trio looked around in wonder as they entered.

"You made it." Misty, who'd changed out of her armor and now donned a shortie wetsuit, mud booties, and gloves, rose from the edge

of one of the depthless pools to greet them. "I already sent my sisters up north to watch over Bill, so we won't be disturbed."

"Good," Gary said.

He wasted no time in releasing Nidoking's Pokéball. The armored rodent Pokémon sent a small tremor through the Gym as its weight dropped on the swampy ground. Gary approached its side and put a hand on its flank. Nidoking looked down at Gary, and its long tail curled in a protective perimeter around him. Ivy and Ash backed away to give them some space for the battle.

"We can do this," Gary said softly. "No matter what she throws at us. Trust me."

Nidoking let out a low, rumbling growl and bared its teeth at Misty.

"So, are you ready?" she asked.

"I don't have all day."

Misty smiled and selected a Pokéball from her belt. "I told you I'd give you my best, and if you do win, I promise I'll support you against Team Rocket. But I'm not going easy on you. If you can't keep up, I *will* destroy you."

"Just fight already. I didn't come here to talk."

"Okay, you asked for it."

She tossed the Pokéball toward the water, and white light burst in a blinding flash. Gary shielded his eyes, and when he looked again, a part of him wished he hadn't.

"...Oh, fuck," Ivy said.

"Get 'em, Gary!" Ash cheered.

He heard it before he could see it. The low, guttural growl was so predatory and ominous that he actually shivered, even though it wasn't terribly loud. Nidoking crouched on his haunches and smashed his heavy tail on the ground, bloodlust building.

The light dissipated and a glittering Gyarados loomed high above in all its atrocious glory. Its lower half was concealed in the water, but judging from the sheer breadth of its face, Gary guessed it had to be about twenty feet long, at least. Its fangs alone were as long as swords,

and its blue-green, plated scales were so densly layered that he was sure not much got through the tough hide.

"Meet my best," Misty said, the pride evident in her tone. "Ready or not, here I come!"

7. Cerulean City, Part 2

Triumvirate, chapter 7: Cerulean City, Part 2
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Gyarados towered over Gary and Nidoking. Its golden belly scales reflected the morning sunlight, brilliant and astonishingly beautiful, but its red eyes burned with a ghastly glow all their own.

"Impressive, isn't he?" Misty said.

Nidoking growled, but Gary laid his palm flat against its long forearm to silently stay it. He kept his eyes on Gyarados, memorizing its appearance as he answered Misty.

"Very."

Misty grinned and swelled with pride. "I trained him up from a Magikarp that liked to hang out in the marsh around the Gym. But he's still pretty young. In the wild, Gyarados can get up to forty or fifty feet long, especially the females."

Gyarados huffed and spewed water spray from the slivered gills protected behind short, blue fins on either side of its face. Gary watched all this in silence as he started calculating a potential battle strategy.

"But like you said, we're not here to talk. Gyarados," Misty said. "Dive!"

Before Gary could do anything, Gyarados leaped into the air and cleared the water entirely. Gary watched, open-mouthed, as the water Dragon glided skillfully fifteen feet over his head as though carried upon invisible wings. It landed in one of the many depthless pools that dotted the ground, seemingly unconnected to the wider section of river and marsh, and sank completely below the surface.

Shit, Gary thought. *So that's how those work.*

His understanding dawned more quickly than he could form full thoughts, and he was already backing up to get out of the way of the battle. "Steady!" he called to Nidoking.

Nidoking was scanning the water in both the pool Gyarados had dived into and the larger river. But upon Gary's command, it bent down on

all fours with its tail in the air and waited.

"What's he doing?" Ivy said. "That thing's gonna jump out again somewhere, I can feel it."

"Me, too," Ash said. "I can't *wait*."

Pikachu squeaked nervously from its place next to Ash. They were seated in chairs on the open second floor behind a steel railing. The vantage gave them a bird's eye view of the arena below and kept them at a safe distance from the action.

Gary remained very still as he waited, noting how Misty also seemed to be waiting for something. She had her arms crossed, like they weren't in the middle of a potentially lethal Pokémon battle, and she was smiling softly.

Where are you?

Almost as soon as he had the thought, a spray of water slammed into him from his five o'clock. Gyarados burst from a different pool than the one it had disappeared into and opened its mouth impossibly wide, revealing three full rows of fangs and a forked tongue.

Misty said nothing, but she raised a fisted hand and swung it to the left. To Gary's horror, Gyarados seemed to understand whatever that communication had been and flipped over in mid air to bring its powerful tail down upon Nidoking.

"Defense Curl!"

Gary barely got the words out before Gyarados's tail slammed into Nidoking's thorny backside from directly above. Water droplets flew in all directions, their sheer speed and force making them sharp as needles. Nidoking took the hit and sank deeper into the muddy marsh underfoot. Gyarados rolled off Nidoking and slipped back into the water with a loud splash, once more disappearing just below the surface in the main river.

"I forgot to mention," Misty called. "Water Pokémon fighting in the water tend to respond better to actions than words. Makes it a little tough for the competition to pick up on what we're doing, of course."

Nidoking uncurled its tail and exposed its head. It was soaking wet and muddy to the elbows, but it was still standing even after a direct hit from Aqua Tail. The Defense Curl had worked just in time.

"You gotta be shitting me," Ivy said. "Did you know that? Tell me you didn't know that."

Ash shook his head. "Guess that's why Misty's a Water Pokémon master. So awesome."

Ivy whacked him on the back of the head. "Whose side are you on?!"

I can't do anything while Gyarados is underwater, Gary thought to himself. *But it only comes out to attack, and I don't know what it's gonna do if she doesn't announce it.*

Gyarados's dorsal fin breached the surface of the river, and Gary followed it with his eyes. It wasn't even trying to hide.

"You can't use Defense Curl all day," Misty taunted.

Maybe I don't have to. But that water...

"What's the matter?" Gary said, smirking. "That Aqua Tail should've KO'ed us. Afraid Nidoking really is hot shit?"

Misty chuckled. "You like pain, don't you?"

She raised her hands to the side, elbows locked, then swiftly brought them together in front of her and lunged forward a step. Gyarados once more jumped high into the air, higher than anything that weighed as much as it did had any business flying, and spat out the most powerful Hydro Pump Gary had ever seen in his life.

"Earth Power!"

Nidoking had been waiting for the next command and was ready. With its hands submerged in the muddy morass, it needed almost no preparation time to launch the attack. The shallow water on the island where Nidoking stood frothed, and a thick wall of muddy earth shot up out of the ground to collide with Gyarados's attack. They exploded in a filthy burst of silt and muddy water, but the mess saved Nidoking another direct hit and left it with a graze.

"Get outta there!" Gary shouted as he ran to the left side of the Gym.

Nidoking mimicked Gary's flight and got down on all fours to run faster. It launched itself into the air with its powerful hind legs and landed with a thud on the next patch of sandy, swampy land.

"You can run, but there's nowhere to hide," Misty said. "At least, not

for you."

Not for you, either, for much longer.

Misty punched the air with her fist, and Gyarados was on the move again. This time, Gary didn't wait for it.

"Toxic Spikes!"

Nidoking doubled over and shook out its hide like a dog trying to get dry. Barbed bits of scale and horn flew off its back and arms and landed in the water around the island it was on, and within seconds the water turned a murky, purplish-grey color. The cattails and reeds that grew naturally on the little patch of land wilted before Gary's eyes, shriveling to tortured, brown masses of soggy pulp.

"Gyarados!" Misty's voice caused the huge water serpent to stop whatever it had planned to do and circle back.

"Huh, not bad," Ivy said. "I didn't think Gary could be that creative."

"It's not creative," Ash said, gaze hard as he watched the poison literally consume the water surrounding Nidoking's solitary island. "He's not improvising; he's planning something. I just have no idea what it is."

"Ash, you okay?"

He was so focused on the battle that he didn't even flash one of his trademark cheesy smiles. "He's already seen how he can win this. He's just running through the motions now. Testing his theory."

Ivy returned her attention to the battle, wondering how on earth Gary could see a path to victory when she was coming up short no matter how she analyzed the situation.

"I see what you're doing," Misty said. "But it's not gonna work. Even poison can't get through Gyarados's scales."

Gary remained silent as Misty made another mysterious gesture that Gyarados intuitively understood. It swam swiftly underwater and disappeared completely.

"Move," Gary commanded.

Nidoking got down on all fours again and jumped to the next island, which happened to be closer to three of the depthless pools.

"Toxic Spikes."

Nidoking shook out more poisoned spikes and infected the three pools, as well as the adjacent section of river water and marshland.

"You're wasting your time," Misty said.

Gary ignored her and directed Nidoking to move onto the next island to repeat the process. Just as it landed with a grunt, though, Gyarados sprang from one of the pools and readied another Aqua Tail.

"Defense Curl!"

As before, Nidoking took the hit and managed to survive its effects. When Gyarados slipped back into the water, Gary ordered Nidoking to continue poisoning the water in the vicinity. The hit had taken a little more out of Nidoking, and its growing fatigue was plain to see, but it stubbornly kept on without complaint.

"You said Gary already knows how he can win," Ivy said from the sidelines. "But Misty's right—Gyarados's scales can resist the poison."

"Yeah," Ash said. "I dunno how he's gonna get around that. But I know *he* knows."

Nidoking worked quickly, and eventually all but two of the seven deep pools and small patches of the river were poisoned. Gyarados avoided the poisoned sections on instinct despite its natural resistance.

"Now, steady," Gary said as they waited for Gyarados to break the surface again.

They didn't have to wait long, and Gyarados burst from one of the pristine pools.

"Gut it!"

Nidoking leaped into the air and crashed into Gyarados just as it was powering up another Hydro Pump. The enormous, poison-secreting horn on Nidoking's forehead connected with Gyarados's golden underbelly but failed to pierce through the tough scales. With a snap of its neck, Nidoking sent Gyarados careening off course and it landed in one of the poisoned pools, where it swiftly disappeared underwater. Nidoking crashed back to the ground with a slam, its horn still glowing with the aftereffects of the powerful Megahorn attack.

Misty sighed dramatically. "I'm telling you. Poison won't work, and even if you tried Horn Drill, it still wouldn't pierce Gyarados's skin. Just give up already. I'd rather not kill your Nidoking if I don't have to."

"So eager to end the battle? We're just getting started."

Misty narrowed her eyes in suspicion, but she wasn't deterred. Again, Gyarados burst through the water, ostensibly impervious to the poison polluting it, and charged at Nidoking again. And again, Gary commanded the behemoth rodent to use Megahorn and toss Gyarados into one of the poisoned pools.

"How many of those do you think Nidoking's got in him? Not many, I'd say," Misty called from across the arena.

I don't need many.

Two more Megahorns later, and Nidoking was visibly tiring beyond help. It could no longer jump into the air, and its breathing had become ragged and heavy. When Gyarados leaped out of the water again, Nidoking didn't leap into the air to greet it.

"Move right and Poison Jab!"

Nidoking skidded to the right, using the slippery mud to its advantage, and swung around on its hind legs. Its spiked tail swooshed through the air, venomous thorns aimed directly at Gyarados, but the Atrocious Pokémon veered in mid air and plunged into one of the poisoned wells again, unwilling to risk the attack just to get to the clean pool Nidoking was protecting.

"What...?" Misty was started to grow suspicious at Nidoking's defensive tactics.

"Toxic Spikes," Gary commanded evenly.

Nidoking shook out more poisoned spikes and soon, there was only a single clean pool left to guard. Everyone waited on bated breath for Gyarados to emerge again, but the stink of pollution was starting to make everyone's eyes water.

"That's a lot of poison," Ash said.

Ivy nodded. "Yeah. Too much, maybe."

The onlookers waited as the minutes ticked by, and when Gyarados emerged again, it remained in the water. Misty signaled for another attack and Gyarados obliged, sending a strong jet of water from its mouth. But Nidoking easily rolled out of the way while expending minimal energy in the process. Gary kept his eyes on Gyarados, who didn't try to jump anymore.

"What the hell?"

The river current had slowly washed away the poison in the larger section of the Gym, but the smaller pools remained clouded with pollution. Gyarados floated in the water, and its blood-red eyes had begun to droop. It made a snorting noise and flapped the fins on the sides of its head, revealing its long gills. They were bruised black as though rotting, and the shadow infecting them was steadily spreading in between its plated scales. Water frothed before its mouth.

"Gyarados!"

Gyarados slowly submerged itself once more, and Gary didn't miss how it let its eyes drift closed just as it disappeared underwater. Misty pulled on the goggles that hung around her neck and dove in after her Pokémon without warning.

"Misty!" Ash shouted. "Shit, the poison!"

Gary ran forward until he was standing next to Nidoking. The big Pokémon was panting and hunched over, but it was still standing, if only barely. Gary laid a hand on Nidoking's arm and grinned up at him.

"That was excellent," he said. "All according to plan."

Ivy helped Ash hobble back down to the main floor, where they stood at the edge of one of the pools—the only one not tainted with poison.

"She's been down there for like five minutes," Ash said. "People can't hold their breaths that long."

Ivy held him back from doing something stupid, but even Pikachu was squeaking and sniffing the pool's edge. The seconds ticked by as five minutes turned to seven, then past ten with no sign of Misty or Gyarados.

"This is crazy." Ash reached for Wartortle's Pokéball and released the large turtle. "Find Misty, and hurry."

Wartortle made a deep-throated clucking sound and got ready to dive into the pool, but all of a sudden, the water broke and Misty grabbed onto the shore.

"Misty!" Ash said.

Ivy leaned down and gave her a hand up out of the water. She shed a layer of water that had gotten caught in her wetsuit and shook out her hair. Gary and Nidoking approached the edge of the water together.

"You poisoned Gyarados," she said as though in a dream, like she couldn't believe it herself. "You poisoned him, then you wore him down, knowing the poison needed constant circulation to bring down something that big." She wiped excess water from her nose and mouth and faced Gary fully. "How did you do it?"

"You were right about Gyarados's tough hide," he explained softly. "But his gills're exposed. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to breathe. That's his weak point. He breathes underwater, and there's no filter against what he takes in. The rest was just waiting you out."

Misty was dripping wet and shivering a little from the deep dive she'd just returned from. "I never thought about that as a weakness before."

"It's easy to miss when the rest of Gyarados is so hard to ignore. And besides, most poisons are inhaled or injected. Only Tentacruel release poison underwater. It's not a common strategy."

She let out a sharp breath and shook her head. "Damn. It's like I can't even be mad. It's my own fault for not realizing what you were doing. I should've been more aware of my own Pokémon's limitations and learned to account for them in battle, even if it *is* an uncommon strategy. Believe me, I won't be making that mistake ever again."

Ash grabbed her shoulder and whirled her around. "You were down there for almost fifteen minutes! What the hell was that? We thought you'd drowned."

Misty's eyes widened, and she looked between a peeved Ash and a suspicious Ivy. "I-I'm just really good at holding my breath. It runs in my family. It's not a big deal."

"It's a big deal when it's fifteen minutes and who the hell knows how many feet deep," Ivy said.

Misty crossed her arms. "I dunno why you're harping on that when

Gary just basically showed me up against all the odds in the universe. I barely made it to Gyarados in time to return him to his Pokéball before he drowned. Who knows how long he'll be out with all that poison in his system?"

"I'm sorry about that," Gary said. "You should get him to the Pokémon Center. Nidoran line poison's slow acting, not like Weezing's poison. As long as Gyarados gets treatment soon, he should be okay."

Misty snorted. "What, so you want me to thank you now for not killing him?"

"No. I just want your Badge and your promise to help, like we agreed."

Misty removed her gloves and ran a hand through her wet hair. "I can't believe I lost. I'm a *Gym Leader*, for crying out loud."

"It's not like you know everyone this side of Mt. Moon to say you're the best of all of them."

He purposefully avoided Ivy's gaze, but he could feel her watching his profile as he borrowed her words from when she'd challenged Brock.

"No, I guess not." Misty shook her head. "Well, I did give you my word. And I guess since you beat me, I have to take back what I said before. You really do have an incredible Nidoking there. I underestimated you."

Gary returned Nidoking to its Pokéball, and the four trainers walked outside together. The Pokémon Center was about a twenty minute walk from the Gym, and they made good time. Nurse Joy was flustered to see Misty and immediately accepted Gyarados's Pokéball to get it treated for poisoning.

"Well, as promised." Misty dug around the waterproof pouch at her hip and produced a small, teardrop-shaped Badge. "Take the Cascade Badge as proof of my support."

Gary accepted the badge and held it up to the sun. It was brilliant, azure crystal as clear as the morning seascape.

"They say that at the bottom of the Cerulean Cove, there's a secret cave where you can mine for water crystals that supposedly make Water-type Pokémon stronger," Misty explained. "I don't know if the legend's true, but I guess it makes the Cascade Badge seem that much more legit."

Gary looked through the Cascade Badge, and the light it refracted caused the sky to light up in brilliant shades of blues and purples. "Someone told me that legends are necessarily true. They have to be possible, otherwise they wouldn't survive in stories."

Ivy quirked a brow. "You believe that?"

"I dunno." He pocketed the Badge and caught her eye. "But I'll let you know when I find out."

The day was only just beginning, and they quickly discovered none of them had had breakfast yet. Ash stubbornly insisted on coming with them, never one to pass up the chance to eat, and soon Misty had secured them a booth at her favorite diner in the southern end of the city. It was a little after ten in the morning, and the place was packed. For the Gym Leader, however, there was no wait for a table or food. Misty and Ivy sat together across from Ash and Gary, while Pikachu sat in Ash's lap and stole his toast to nibble on.

As they heartily ate a full, home-cooked meal, Misty asked them about what their plans were going forward.

"I was thinking Saffron," Gary said between sips of coffee. "It's the closest."

"Hey, weren't you the one telling me Saffron was in some kind of fight?" Ivy said through a mouthful of egg and toast.

Misty frowned. "Yeah, I would advise against Saffron right now. You'd be better off heading to Vermilion or through Rock Tunnel to Lavender, although there's no Gym there."

"I'm officially vetoing any more caves. Besides, we're gonna have to go to Saffron at some point," Ash said between mouthfuls of pancake. "I mean, there's a Gym Leader there and all."

Misty lowered her voice so the patrons nearest them would not overhear. "You're aware of Sabrina's feud with Erika, right? Well, in the past month things've gone from a not-so-friendly rivalry to something more serious. Saffron recently introduced a really exorbitant export tariff to surrounding cities, including Cerulean. It's not a huge deal for us because resources around Route Twenty-Five are stable enough for us to be self-sufficient. But if they don't change the rates, things'll probably get really bad for Lavender and Celadon down the line."

Gary set down his coffee. "Saffron co-owns most of the good farmland to the south with Vermilion. They'd have to get approval to change the tariff rates."

"Not anymore. Saffron's been slowly buying it up over the last six or seven months," she said. "Celadon's surrounded by Viridian Forest, but there's hardly any arable land. They've depended on Saffron's exports for years. And since Silph headquarters are in Saffron, you can imagine how difficult it's getting to secure the latest hardware and software at a reasonable price. If they were to completely cut off exports, Vermilion wouldn't be able to build ships, Lavender would be completely cut off from the rest of the world, and Celadon would have no way of maintaining their artificial greenhouses to supplement the food supply."

"Wait," Ivy said. "Are you saying Saffron could hold all the other cities hostage? That's insane."

"They haven't gone that far, not even close, but I can't pretend like it's outside the realm of possibility. Saffron's the capital of Kanto, the most modern city and the oldest, and they have more political power than most of the other cities combined aside from Indigo Plateau. Celadon's a wealthy city, so they can absorb the higher rates pretty easily right now. But who knows how long before Saffron does take more drastic measures? And by the way, Vermilion and Lavender aren't as rich as Celadon. Lavender doesn't even have a Gym to protect it."

"And lemme guess," Ash said with thinly veiled disgust. "No one's stepping up to help, right? It's not anyone's problem."

Misty sighed. "I know it's a hard thing to accept, Ash, believe me. But how can I possibly divert resources my city needs to Vermilion and Lavender? It's not like they'd do the same for Cerulean. We're lucky we have access to the coast. Without the fishing industry here, we'd be struggling a lot more."

Gary was silent for a moment as he thought about all this. "I knew Saffron and Celadon had always been at odds politically, but this is the first I'm hearing about things getting more serious than old grudges. Any idea what's causing it?"

"No idea," Misty said. "Sabrina's always been a recluse. I've never met her, and back when my mom was Gym Leader, she said Sabrina never even attended her own official Gym Leader inauguration at Indigo

Plateau. No one really knows anything about her."

Ivy tapped the edge of her plate as she digested the information. "It's not like Erika can just hate Sabrina or Saffron for no good reason. I bet she knows something you don't."

"I couldn't tell you, honestly. Erika's, well... Let's just say she's a bit of a princess, and I don't mean the fairytale kind that animals and nameless princes fall over backwards for. She's a selfish snob who doesn't care about anyone but herself."

Ash swallowed the half of a pancake he'd been chewing on. "Hey, you don't think our friendly, neighborhood Team Rocket could be involved, do you?"

"Team Rocket's bad news, but even I think it's a little much to just assume everything that goes wrong is related to them," Ivy said.

Ash said nothing to that and frowned.

"Ash?" Misty said. "What is it?"

"I dunno. Just something I saw in Mt. Moon right before I ran into Jessie and James. I told you guys I found an abandoned lab, right?"

Ivy's expression darkened. "The Chimera lab, yeah."

"I had a minute to look around before I got busted, and the machinery in there was pretty old and rusty. But I noticed it was Silph tech."

"That's not exactly surprising since Silph's basically got a monopoly here in Kanto. I've never even heard rumors about them being affiliated with Team Rocket, much less anything substantial," Misty said.

"You talked about Silph before, too," Ivy said. "Who are they?"

Gary steepled his hands on the table. "They're a very old, very large company, one of the biggest in Kanto. They began as a manufacturing firm producing things like farming equipment, but when the war broke out with Johto, they took on the bulk of Vermilion's, Fuchsia's, and Cinnabar's military contracts. As the three largest coastal cities, they were Johto's primary invasion targets, so most of the defense fortifications had to be diverted there. Silph made millions thanks to the war, and that's when they moved from Vermilion to Saffron. They basically own the city from a financial and employment perspective,

and they're responsible for a lot of the cash flow in and out of Saffron. It's because of Silph and the opportunities it created that Lavender flourished. Celadon just got lucky owning the largest gold mine in Kanto and not getting air raided in the war like Lavender and Fuchsia did."

"Yeah," Misty said. "Now Silph's expanded into the computer hardware and software business. Basically anything electronic we use today was built, modified, or engineered by Silph at some stage. A lot of the Gyms rely on Silph tech for things like the Mt. Moon thruway from here to Pewter. It was Silph construction equipment that made that project possible."

"Even the Pokédex Gramps made used Silph hardware inputs. But the software was all Bill," Gary added.

"Actually, Bill used to work for Silph," Misty explained when Ivy got a confused look on her face. "He quit about a year ago and moved out here. I met him when I was just starting out as Gym Leader."

Gary noticed Ivy's look and how she'd gone quiet. "What're you thinking?"

"Just that everything seems a little too connected to be coincidence. Silph as the major Kanto technology and manufacturing institution, its role in the war with Johto, the fact that it's in Saffron where a lot of problems seem to be originating. And even Bill's involvement makes me wonder."

"Nothing points definitively to Team Rocket," Gary said. "We can't jump to conclusions just because it's the easy way out. They weren't even around during the war."

"Yeah, I dunno," Ash said. "I don't think we have the whole story. It's not like it's a crime for Silph to be a crazy successful company, you know?"

By now, their food had gone cold as the conversation sucked them in and posed more questions than they'd had before.

"We don't know enough," Gary agreed. "Which is why I still think we should check out Saffron and see what's happening."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Misty said. "Saffron's home to a lot of trainers who use Psychic-type Pokémon, including Sabrina. They don't have a lot of weaknesses, and the ones they do have're pretty

uncommon and hard to train up. Sabrina might be a shut-in from where we're sitting, but she's the one who singlehandedly transformed Saffron Gym from a Fighting Dojo to what it is now. She basically wiped out all the Fighting-type trainers and their Pokémon three years ago."

"What? That's insane. Why didn't I know about that?" Ash said.

"Because the media suppressed the story. I only know because I'm a Gym Leader, and it's not exactly a secret you can keep from the Elite Four. But power speaks for itself, and as long as Saffron has a Gym Leader sworn to defend the city, the Elite Four doesn't intervene. Sabrina's in charge, and no one's really questioned that. Yet another reason for us Gym Leaders to stay out of each other's ways."

Ivy smirked in a way that reminded Gary of the day in Pallet Town when he'd found her sharpening a knife as long as her forearm on Delia Ketchum's living room couch. "Sabrina sounds like a real queen bitch. I can't *wait* to meet her."

"Look, if you want my advice, go to Vermilion next. Lt. Surge is the Gym Leader there, and he worked closely with Gym Leader Blaine in the war. I don't know Surge personally, but I know he's got a reputation for being fair to a fault. It might be better for you guys to train up your Pokémon some more and get Surge's buy-in if you can before charging into whatever's going on in Saffron." She caught Gary's eye and said, "You may have beaten me in a battle, but that was a controlled situation. Until you can figure out how to command three or four Pokémon in a fight at a time while fighting others who're doing the same thing, you're not ready to go to Saffron."

Gary's knee-jerk instinct was to push back, but he remembered the encounter with Jessie and James on Route Twenty-Five the other day and how his inability to split his focus ended up putting Golduck and Aerodactyl in critical condition.

"That kind of training takes time," Ivy said. "And we don't exactly have time."

"Then we learn on the road," Ash said. "Let's go to Vermilion and talk to Surge. And this time, I really *do* call the Gym Leader. I don't care if both my legs're broken and I have to crawl on my hands to the Gym."

Misty laughed. "Maybe you should try to recover first, then worry about whatever injuries you'll get on the road to Vermilion."

They paid the bill and headed back to the Pokémon Center to force Ash to rest. He made no secret as to his annoyance, but Misty advised against relying on a cure-all Hyper Potion for a quick fix. They were meant for emergencies and critical conditions when there was no other choice, and they were a poor substitute for good old rest and relaxation. Ivy and Gary also opted to spend the rest of the day resting after the rollercoaster action that had characterized the last several weeks. Misty returned to the Gym and resumed her daily duties.

"We'll stick around for another three days," Gary said when they were all back in their rented room and Ash was in bed. "By then, we'll be ready to travel south down Routes Five and Six to Vermilion. It should take us about two weeks, maybe a little longer depending on how fast we move. We'll have to go around Saffron."

Ivy nodded. "Sounds good."

"Guys, how's a man s'posed to get any sleep with you two filling air time?" Ash groused.

Pikachu squeaked and plopped down on Ash's chest.

"Sorry, Ash," Ivy said. "We'll be quieter."

"I'm taking a shower," Gary said.

"Fine, but I'm taking the bed."

Gary almost wanted to argue, but the dried swamp mud on his boots and pants had been filling his nose with a subtle but rancid stench all morning.

Shower first, push Ivy onto the floor later.

Priorities.

The next three days passed by quickly. True to her word, Misty sorted out the hospital bills. Ash recovered fully and was eager to get back on the road, having grown a little stir crazy being confined to the bed most of the day. On the morning of the third day, Ivy accidentally walked in on him getting out of the shower and noticed the warped skin on his back and shoulders, scars from the burns he'd suffered at the aberrant Rhydon's hands. A fierce, white-hot anger bubbled under her skin at the sight.

I swear I'm gonna kill those assholes Jessie and James if I ever see them again.

Ash, for his part, said nothing about it and reverted to his usual self. Ivy didn't understand it, how he could be so blasé about it when he would have those terrible scars and the memory they symbolized for the rest of his life, but she elected not to bring it up. He probably had his reasons, and she was just glad he and Gary were okay and they were all together again.

Misty had asked them to stop by the Gym before they left to have breakfast, so once Ivy had finished packing up for the trip ahead, she headed downstairs to the clinic to retrieve Jigglypuff and Gary's Nidoking.

"I've never seen a Nidoking quite so large before," Nurse Joy said as she handed Ivy Nidoking's Pokéball. "Whatever he went through, I doubt he would've pulled through as well as he did if he weren't so bulky."

Ivy smiled. "Tell me about it."

"And your Wigglytuff is doing much better now, too. She just needed uninterrupted rest for a few days. I think you'll be happy about how well she bounced back."

"Sorry, what? You meant my Jigglypuff, right? I just caught her coming through Mt. Moon and dropped her off here a few days ago."

Nurse Joy furrowed her brow in confusion. "No, I'm sure I meant Wigglytuff. She's the same one you dropped off in this Great Ball, there's no mistake. And yours was especially resilient."

Ivy accepted the Great Ball, unsure what to say. She'd definitely caught a Jigglypuff escaping from Mt. Moon, and that same Jigglypuff had saved her and Gary's lives.

It couldn't be...

Ivy paid for the services and retreated to the lobby, turning over the Great Ball in her hand. Looking over her shoulder to make sure no one was watching her, she hesitantly pressed the release button. In a burst of white light, a furry, pink rabbit appeared crouched on all fours. But its ears were much longer than Ivy remembered, and its overall size was about twice as large as Jigglypuff had been.

The Wigglytuff twitched its nose and blinked big, violet eyes up at Ivy before rising up onto its hind legs. Ivy just stared.

"Oh my god."

"Now what's the matter?"

Gary walked up beside her but stopped abruptly when he caught sight of the Wigglytuff. Ivy swallowed.

"Remember that Jigglypuff that saved our lives?"

Gary quickly put two and two together. "Wait, it evolved? Just like that?"

She turned and held his gaze.

"You don't think..." Gary trailed off. "Like what happened to Nidorino." He paused and suddenly had a thought. "Those Jigglypuff and Clefairy we saw were all dancing around the Moonstone. I wonder if it was some kind of evolutionary ritual."

"You mean like they knew they would evolve? Is that possible?"

"I don't see why not. But if that's the case, then it means there's a small colony of super-powered Clefable and Wigglytuff living in Mt. Moon." He rubbed his chin. "Those Metronome Earthquakes were extremely powerful. I hadn't seen anything like that since Gramps' Rhyperior, and that thing's forty years old."

Wigglytuff had taken to exploring the lobby a little, and when it found a small vase with flowers and reeds on a center table, it jumped up on the table and knocked the vase over to get at the plants and eat them.

"I don't even know what a Wigglytuff can do," Ivy stammered. "She's so...pink."

Gary nudged her shoulder with his. "Better find out before she eats all the centerpieces in this place."

Wigglytuff had knocked down another flower vase, and this one rolled off the table and shattered on the floor. Ivy winced as Nurse Joy looked around, drawn by the sound.

"Wigglytuff." She approached the pink rabbit, and Wigglytuff looked up at her with a dandelion hanging from its mouth. Ivy sighed. "C'mon. Let's find you something a little better to eat."

Ash joined them shortly thereafter, and the trio headed for Cerulean Gym. Pikachu and Aerodactyl had taken up their usual freeloading spots, and Ivy was busy chasing after Wigglytuff as it eluded re-capture and searched for food.

"Aw, come on!" The laser on Wigglytuff's Great Ball missed the pink rabbit by a hair's breadth as Wigglytuff hopped along and chowed down on the reeds and long grasses lining the roads. But it was careful not to wander too far off the path and sink into the marshland.

"So, another Moonstone-enhanced Pokémon," Ash said. "And I got a Charmeleon. I'd say Cerulean treated us pretty well."

Ivy paused and leaned on her knees to catch her breath. "Yeah, sure, if you ignore how we all barely made it here alive and now I can't even outrun a goddamned rabbit. Wigglytuff! Hey!"

Wigglytuff rose up on its hind legs, ears twitching, and looked back with wide eyes. It was munching on some kind of grass.

"Don't look at me like you're the innocent little lamb here," Ivy said. "Oh, forget it." She threw the Great Ball, and Wigglytuff was too startled to dodge it in time. "*Finally*, geez."

Ash snickered. "A little different from your usual, huh?"

"A *little*."

"Why do you mostly train Dark types, anyway? It'd be better to have a balanced team."

She noticed that Gary inclined his head to listen to their conversation and huffed. "It's not like I don't know that, but I just always liked Dark Pokémon. Even Batty's pretty similar, being nocturnal and all. Wigglytuff's just... I dunno. I never would've imagined I'd have one on my team."

"Maybe it's a good thing," Gary said casually. "Wigglytuff'll teach you how to do things differently. You can't use the same strategies for every fight."

"I guess that makes sense. I dunno, it's just weird. Like, I feel physically strange being around Wigglytuff, like we're not compatible or something. You've never felt anything like that before?"

Gary and Ash both shook their heads.

"Well, I hope I get over it. It's not like I can just leave Wigglytuff. She saved our lives, after all."

Ash smiled and slung an arm around her shoulder. "I think it's gonna be fine."

They reached the Gym, and Misty was waiting for them. There were some other trainers there, mostly older men and women, who were dressed in wetsuits. They were gathered around a table that held all manner of equipment for underwater exploration. A few Water-type Pokémon waded in the large river section, including a large Seaking and two Cloyster.

"Hey, guys!" Misty ushered them toward the living quarters section of the Gym where she'd put together a farewell breakfast spread for them.

"What's up with those people back there?" Gary asked as they ate.

"Oh, those're some of the local trainers. They come here to train with me and my sisters in exchange for help patrolling the border. Lately, I've got them working a lot underwater."

Ash grinned. "You guys really do some cool stuff. I was really surprised when you were commanding Gyarados just waving your hands around."

Misty made a sour face. "It's called Action Imitation, and like I said, it's a much better way to communicate with Pokémon in the water. They can't hear you so well underwater, and people can't exactly talk underwater."

Ash laughed. "Don't get all mad, I thought it was awesome. Wish I could do it."

Misty flushed at the easy compliment and focused on her food. "Well, you'd need a teacher, and your Pokémon would have to go through special conditioning. The Squirtle line responds really well to Action Imitation from what I've seen."

"You mean, a teacher like you?"

Ivy kicked Gary under the table and bit back a smirk. Frowning, he kicked her back.

"Well, you guys have to leave, so..." Misty trailed off. Then, she looked

up quickly remembering something. "Oh! By the way, you guys're gonna need some help on the road. So I got you all enough supplies and food for the trip to Vermilion. And Ash, your armor was melted beyond repair so I'm loaning you a set."

"Wow, thanks, Misty!" Ivy gushed. "That's *really* nice of her, isn't it, Gary? Especially since now I don't have to secure more cash for us."

Gary shot her a dirty look. "Are you trying to piss me off? Pesky woman."

"Wait, what do you mean 'loan'?" Ash asked. "I have to give it back?"

"Well, yeah. It belongs to the Gym and was paid for by the Elite Four defense stipend." She smirked and leaned closer to Ash. "So you better bring it back to me in good shape, got it?"

Ash blinked in surprise, then smiled his easy smile. "I promise."

Ivy choked on her orange juice suddenly and started coughing violently. Gary gave her a weird look and scooted away from her a little.

"Anyway," Gary said. "We should hit the road. Misty, thanks for everything."

They all stood up, and Misty shook Gary's and Ivy's hands. "No problem. Be careful on the road. And no more jumping out of caves," she directed at Ash.

Ash laughed. "I'll try."

Misty held out her hand for him to shake, and he pulled her into a hug without warning.

"I know I'm a broken record," he said softly, "but seriously, thanks for everything. You saved my life."

Misty had turned beet red in surprise and embarrassment, but Ash let her go before she could react physically. Smiling, she said, "Always. I-I mean, not that I'd want you to get hurt again so I could save you again, but obviously I *would* save you again. I just mean—"

"I know. Lucky me to have a Gym Leader lookin' out for me."

"Well!" Ivy said, clapping her hands together. "We should probably be going."

Pikachu squeaked, excited for Ash to be back to normal and the prospect of another journey ahead. They said their goodbyes to Misty, and soon they were heading south out of Cerulean. The Sapphire City and the swamp upon which it floated faded behind them as they followed a path down the steppe onto Route Five. The land was flat but sank steadily in elevation as they moved south around the vast farmland that surrounded Saffron City.

Gary released Growlithe, while Ash let out Ivysaur and, after a long-anticipated wait, his fully evolved Butterfree. Ivy watched as the delicate Bug Pokémon fluttered overhead and admired its pearly, white wings. Butterfree was the size of a large dinner plate.

"I never thought I'd say this after what happened with those Ariados, but I gotta admit that's a pretty Bug," Ivy said.

Ash grinned up at Butterfree. "Yeah, it was worth the wait."

"Better be careful," Gary cautioned. "Butterfree's not a good choice in most fights. They're better for stealth and sneak attacks."

"Then I guess we'll be ready if we ever have to sneak up on some bad guys."

Butterfree floated to the ground where Ivysaur was ambling alongside Ash and keeping an eye out for any stray Rattata to rip into for its next meal. Attracted by the budding flower on Ivysaur's back, Butterfree happily situated itself on the fleshy leaves and began to suck the nectar from the large, pink flower. Ivysaur didn't seem to mind or even notice.

Ivy selected Houndour's Pokéball and released the black canine, who immediately began playing a game of chase with Gary's Growlithe. Aerodactyl squawked at their antics and swished its tail, eager to play but unwilling to abandon its perch on Gary's back.

"Hey," Ash said. "What about Wigglytuff?"

"What about her?" Ivy said.

"Maybe you should let her out? You know, so you can get used to her."

"She might run away."

"Then you'll have to catch her," Gary said. "Best way to bond, if you ask me."

Ivy pouted for a minute, but she hated the smarmy look on Gary's face. She just knew he'd come up with some nasty comment if she chickened out, and there was no way she was going to let him have the last laugh. So she tossed Wigglytuff's Great Ball and released the pink rabbit.

Wigglytuff immediately began hopping back and forth as it took in the strange sights so different from its home in Mt. Moon. It tried to sniff at Ivysaur's flower, but the lumbering Pokémon growled and stamped the ground to shoo it away, disturbing Butterfree and generally disrupting the peace. When Houndour and Growlithe got wind of Wigglytuff, they unanimously agreed to team up and rope the pink rabbit into their game, much to Ivy's horror.

"*Houndour*! You cut that shit out *right now*! Ugh, Wigglytuff, *get back here*!"

But Houndour and Growlithe were too far gone stretching their legs as they darted after Wigglytuff, who was skillfully dodging their every attempt to pounce. More than once, the fiery canines ended up with mouths full of dirt in their fruitless chasing.

"Hey, Ash," Gary said. "Feel like rabbit for dinner tonight?"

Ivy shot him a dirty look. "I hate you."

"What'd I say about no more lies?"

"It's *not* a lie, and we're in a *fight* right now, you jerk."

Gary laughed.

Ash walked with his hands behind his head, and Pikachu hopped on top of his cap. "Well, buddy? I get the feeling this is gonna be a great day."

Pikachu squeaked happily and twitched its furry tail.

It was not a great day.

The downhill hike was fast going, and the trio put considerable distance between Cerulean City and them. Storm clouds rolled in from the north, chasing their progress and signaling rain to come. Saffron-managed farmland stretched to the southwest, and they traveled around it to avoid entering Saffron's territory. Green hills to the far

south rolled seemingly forever, but beyond them lay Vermilion, the scarlet city of sunsets. Gary had never been, but Professor Oak talked about Vermilion sometimes. After what Bill had hinted at about Professor Oak traveling around Kanto and Johto in his youth, Gary had to wonder just how well he knew Vermilion and why he hardly talked about his adventures.

But all those thoughts were suddenly unimportant when, close to sunset, the trio encountered a pack of Primeape and Mankey feasting on the remains of a man and a woman that looked like they had been traveling west toward Saffron. Everyone froze and stared in horror at the internecine not five hundred feet away at the edge of the thicker trees to the east. Growlithe and Houndour pawed the ground and snarled, but their trainers stayed them.

"Holy shit," Ash said. "Is that—"

The breeze blew in from the southeast and masked their smell, but it carried the stench of the slaughter downwind to them. Gary covered his nose and mouth with an arm and tried not to gag.

"Oh, fuck," he said. "They've been there for a while."

Wigglytuff had calmed down considerably after outrunning Growlithe and Houndour for several hours, and eventually the canines gave up the chase. It now hopped along next to Ivy, but the smell of the chewed up corpses caused it to flatten its elongated ears over its back and fall very still, vigilant. Aerodactyl was the only one of the bunch eager to dive in jaws first. It had begun to drool in reaction to the monkeys' bloodlust.

"I count four Primeape," Ivy said softly. "Fifteen or sixteen Mankey. That's a lot."

"Too many," Gary agreed. "But they'll see us if we try to go around them. We have no cover out here."

"Then let's surprise 'em," Ash said. "Misty said we should learn how to be more dynamic in battle. No time like the present to start."

Ivy's expression was grim. "My Dark Pokémon're weak to Fighting types. I won't be much help."

"Your Golbat will. We could use an aerial advantage," Gary said, reaching for Scyther's and Nidoking's Pokéballs.

"Count us in, too. Butterfree," Ash said.

The large butterfly floated into the air and fluttered above Ash's head, awaiting his command.

"Ivy," Gary said softly so Ash wouldn't overhear. "I need you and Golbat to be fast. I'm gonna have my hands full commanding Nidoking, Scyther, Aerodactyl, and Growlithe at the same time."

"Please. Keeping you alive is practically my day job."

Ash had Pikachu, Ivysaur, and Butterfree ready to fight, and Ivy selected Golbat's Pokéball. Wigglytuff, sensing the impending fight, stayed close to Ivy. The trio stalked closer to the feasting Pokémon, careful to be as silent as possible. The stormclouds rolling in from the north were nearly upon them, bringing with them brontide and dark omens. A Primeape ripped off a chunk of the dead woman's cheek with its teeth and kicked one of the smaller Mankey that tried to steal the tender meat.

"Up high," Ash whispered to Butterfree as they crept closer.

The kicked Mankey crawled to its feet, spotted the encroaching trainers, and let out an angry squeal that alerted the others. A breath of silence passed as the Primeape and Mankey discovered the intruders and felt stunned to see them. But it passed all too soon, and the monkeys attacked in a rage.

"Cut 'em up, Batty!"

Ivy released Golbat, and the huge, blue bat soared through the sky before swooping down, fat tongue lolling, and rammed the nearest Primeape with a powerful Wing Attack that drew a deep gash across the monkey's hairy stomach.

Having lost the element of surprise, Gary threw caution to the wind and released both Scyther and Nidoking. Growlithe leaped in front of him ready for action.

"Kill anything that moves," Gary said.

"Thunderbolt!" Ash barked.

Pikachu jumped from Ash's shoulder and lit up like a miniature sun. A thick bolt of lightning zigzagged through the air and struck a Mankey before jumping to another Mankey next to it. The little monkeys

jerked unnaturally as the electricity ravaged their bodies and boiled their blood. They fell together in a smoking heap, and their leathery skin bloomed angry, red welts that popped and leaked yellow pous.

Two Mankey flew at Ivy, biting and scratching with Fury Swipes.

"Houndour!" she screamed.

Houndour raced toward her but, realizing it wouldn't outspeed the Mankey, coughed up black smoke and spat a roiling vortex of sentient fire that hurtled toward the Mankey faster than Houndour itself could move. The Fire Spin slammed into the nearest Mankey and surrounded it completely, burning it alive. Only its shrieks of pain remained when the fire died down.

Ivy went for her knife to block the other Mankey that flew at her, but it was freakishly fast and slammed into her arm brace that she lifted to shield her face. Mankey slashed at her armor but failed to do more than barely scratch the surface. Then, out of nowhere, Wigglytuff kicked the Mankey with its powerful hind legs and sent it careening twenty feet away into a Primeape that was about to pummel Ash's Ivysaur with its powerful fists.

Gary saw that Ivy was okay and spared her not a moment longer of attention as he focused on what was going on in front of him.

"Poison Jab!"

Nidoking bellowed and crashed to the ground on all fours before swinging around with its huge tail. Mankey rolled out of the way to avoid the venomous bludgeoning, and they scattered.

"Tear them apart!" Gary shouted.

Scyther let out a high-pitched screech and flew at the scattered Mankey, slashing with its sickle limbs and cutting through anything in its path. Growlithe barked and ran after Nidoking, darting around it and powering up a Flame Wheel that collided with the Primeape Wigglytuff had knocked off course with its Mega Kick.

Ash kept an eye on the sky as Golbat veered and got ready to swoop back in for another deadly Wing Attack. The frantic Mankey and remaining Primeape had lost all sense of coordination and just began attacking with ruthless determination. One of the Primeape, a fairly large specimen almost as tall as Gary, threw a punch at Ash that Ivysaur, having been saved a pummeling earlier thanks to Wigglytuff,

stopped with a timely Vine Whip. The lash-like vines secured Primeape by the wrists and vaulted it into the air, where Golbat swooped in out of nowhere and hit it at top speed with another Wing Attack. The force of Golbat's attack nearly severed Primeape's head, and blood and guts rained down below on Ivysaur and Ash.

Aerodactyl, not one to be left out of a good fight, leaped from Gary's shoulders and scrambled toward a charging Mankey. With snapping jaws, it tore into the small monkey and began devouring it alive. Mankey tried to scratch at Aerodactyl and managed to draw thin scratches in the reptile's tough hide, but its efforts proved futile and soon it fell still as Aerodactyl yanked its liver out and swallowed it whole.

A Primeape that was ostensibly the largest of the group began wailing on Nidoking out of nowhere, and three Mankey followed its lead. Nidoking defended itself, but the assault was too much to counter all at once.

"Fury Cutter!" Gary shouted. "Nidoking, bury them!"

Scyther buzzed overhead and swooped toward Nidoking. It slashed at the nearest Mankey and sliced it clean in two. Blood splattered across the Bug's plated, green hide. Nidoking roared and smashed its armored claws and tail on the ground, inducing an Earthquake attack that shook the whole area. But the Mankey and Primeape didn't let up and kept coming.

Ash pointed at the nimble monkeys that dodged the worst of Nidoking's Earthquake. "Whirlwind!"

Butterfree flapped its wings hard and kicked up a tornado far more powerful than anyone would have expected from such a fragile insect. The gale blew rocks and debris unearthed by Nidoking's Earthquake and slammed into the Mankey and Primeape rushing the behemoth rodent. The wind speed was too much for them to handle and impossible to dodge, and they lost their balance and fell back. Growlithe and Houndour were ready to give chase with a pair of Fire Fangs. Working together without direction from their trainers, they pounced on the lone Primeape of the group and bit, crunched, and tore at its muscled arms and legs, immolating it from the inside out.

The remaining few Mankey, realizing they were severely outclassed now that their Primeape leaders all lay dead or dying, scattered and attempted to flee. Golbat swooped down from above and scooped up

one of the fleeing Mankey in its umbrella-like mouth. The Mankey stood no chance as Golbat crunched down on it with powerful jaws and landed in a nearby tree to devour its meal. One of Mankey's severed arms fell out of Golbat's mouth and landed on the forest floor, twitching.

"Aw, gross," Ash complained as he pulled off his cap, which was splattered with monkey blood much like his torso. "Why'm I the one who always gets sprayed?"

Thunder cracked in the sky, and Pikachu squeaked in excitement at the flash of natural lightning that cut a mean streak through the dark clouds. The rain began dumping like the sky had reached its limit and burst at the seams.

"At least you get a free shower," Ivy said.

She bent down to pet Wigglytuff on its tufted head. The pink rabbit sniffed the air, and began to shake itself out as the rain soaked it. Ivy recalled it to the Great Ball.

Houndour and Growlithe had been going to town on the Primeape they brought down and had cooked and ripped the meaty flesh from its arms and legs, but the sudden downpour irritated them and they began to whine. Gary and Ivy recalled them to their Pokéballs before the water could disturb them too much. Nidoking was perfectly happy to pick up where they'd left off. It picked up the half roasted Primeape with its meaty claws and ripped the monkey clean in two, splashing its chest with blood. Intestines spilled from Primeape's rended insides like linked sausages, and Nidoking began biting chunks out of Primeape as though it were nothing more than a beef jerky snack.

Ash recalled Butterfree before the rain could weigh down its powdered wings. "Always look on the bright side, right?"

Gary was more interested in the corpses the monkeys had been preying upon and went to investigate. He kneeled down next to them and held a hand to his face to stave off the smell of rot. They were in bad shape. In addition to the bloody sores on her face and arms, the woman had a hole through her stomach the size of a baseball, where Gary guessed one of the Primeape had punched clean through her. She wore boiled leather but no proper armor. She'd never stood a chance.

The man was more picked apart than the woman, and Gary again wondered just how long they'd been out here feeding the Mankey and Primeape. The softer areas on his belly, upper arms, buttocks, and face

were completely devoured. Like his companion, he also wore only piecemeal armor that hadn't saved him from the ravenous monkeys. Gary shook his head in disgust.

Since when do Mankey and Primeape have a taste for human flesh?

He pulled out his Pokédex and scanned a couple of the dead Primeape and Mankey lying about and began scrolling through the entries. They were omnivores whose diet consisted mainly of a variety of sweet fruits and leaves, according to Oak's data, but they preferred to prey on Raticate, Rattata, and the occasional Jigglypuff when available. There was nothing about proclivities for violence against humans, let alone a taste for human flesh.

"Find anything?" Ivy asked as she kneeled down next to him.

Gary snapped the Pokédex shut. "Just a lot of blood."

Ivy shrugged and started checking the corpse's pockets. They had some cash on them, which she pocketed, and they carried passports. She flipped through them.

"Check it out," she said, nudging Gary. "They're from Lavender Town. That's east of here, right?"

Gary examined the passports. "Yeah. Looks like they weren't trainers, either. Why would anyone be stupid enough to come through Route Eight without any Pokémon protection? They're not even wearing proper armor."

"Beats me. It's like they were asking for trouble. Either that or they were running from something worse."

Gary looked down at the bodies. The man's chewed up face, unrecognizable, was contorted in a ghastly scream that betrayed his anguish and fear as the Mankey and Primeape tore him asunder. "Yeah, a hell of a lot worse."

"Hey, guys," Ash called from a short distance away deeper in the woods. "You better take a look at this."

Gary and Ivy got up and joined Ash where he stood over another body they hadn't noticed before. This one was a child, a little boy probably around twelve or thirteen, and he was dressed similarly to the half-eaten couple save for the cloth, white mask he wore over his face that concealed everything but his closed eyes. But perhaps more bizarre

was the boy's seemingly pristine condition. There wasn't a scratch on him that the trio could see.

"Did you touch him?" Gary asked.

"No, just found him like that."

Suspicious, Gary looked around briefly until he found a snapped branch lying on the ground and picked it up. He kneeled down and began poking at the cloth wrappings around the boy's face.

"I'm guessing those were his parents the Mankey were going to town on," Ivy said.

"That's what I was thinking. But why would they leave this kid untouched? Not that I wanted to find him mutilated or somethin', but it's just weird, you know?"

Gary succeeded in getting the wrappings loose and they peeled away. What he saw made him recoil in disgust. "I think I know why," he answered Ash's question.

The boy's face was gaunt to an extreme one might only see in desiccated corpses. His once youthful, chubby face was drained as though something had sucked all the energy, muscle, and blood from him. His eyes, which Gary had thought to be just a dark brown color, now revealed themselves to be bloodshot black, like a shadow had taken up residence and slowly consumed the natural blue of his eyes.

"What the hell happened to him?" Ivy said.

Ash kneeled down with Pikachu, and the yellow rodent hissed at the corpse's smell. It wasn't rotted so much as dank, like the smell of a bog where death lay buried under layers of silt, sand, and stagnant water. Just barely there, but unmistakeable. Whatever it was, Pikachu backed away, unwilling to indulge the scent any longer than necessary. Ash was less bothered by it and squinted at the boy's hands. The fingernails were bruised purple, like he'd jammed them in a door by accident. The skin on his hands wasn't as shriveled as his face, but it was dry and cracked, although no blood oozed from the small lacerations.

"This is seriously fucked up," Ash said. "No wonder the Mankey and Primeape left him alone. I wouldn't wanna touch this kid, either."

"Have you ever seen anything like this before?" Ivy asked more to

Gary than to Ash.

"Never," Gary admitted. "Just from looking at him, I don't think whatever happened to him could've been a human or a Pokémon, though. Maybe some kind of drug?"

"Well, whatever this kid was on, I hope they're not handing it out at the local hospital." Ash got up and shook out his hair, which was heavy with the falling rain. "Damn, we're gonna get soaked out here. We need to find shelter."

Gary stood up, too. "Let's get away from this place first. I don't wanna be anywhere near this kid. Whatever happened to him was enough to ward off the Mankey and Primeape, and if it's a disease, we don't know if it's contagious."

Ivy eyed the wrinkled kid with thinly veiled repulsion. "I agree. We should get the hell away from here."

The Pokémon were fairly fast eaters, so by the time the trio was ready to set off into the deluge, they had mostly sated themselves. Gary recalled Nidoking and kept Scyther and Aerodactyl out to scout ahead and keep watch, respectively. Ivy instructed Golbat to fly above them and scan a wider area for any more threats with its echolocation. The huge bat cleared the earth in three big flaps and soon was completely out of sight in the hard rain and dark skies. Ash and Ivysaur brought up the rear, with Ivysaur enjoying the water and the mangled Mankey leg it chewed on as it walked.

They wanted to put some distance between themselves and the gravesite, but the downpour wasn't letting up and soon they were shivering and miserable. Luck was also not on their side, and they found no passable shelter for the next seven miles of hard hiking. With no choice but to break for the night or catch pneumonia, the trio huddled around the thickest copse of trees they could find. The ground was damp, but a bed of pine needles kept the earth from turning too muddy and flooding. With no other choice, they made camp in dejected silence and huddled together for warmth in their sleeping bags.

"How long did you say it would take to get to Vermilion?" Ivy asked through chattering teeth.

Gary shifted next to her in search of a little more warmth. "About two weeks. But if the weather keeps up like this, it'll slow us down more."

"Y'know, if Aerodactyl could actually *fly* we wouldn't be in this mess," Ash said from Ivy's other side.

"Yeah, good one, Ash. How *dare* Aerodactyl be born a baby like every other newborn Pokémon," Gary sneered.

"Not helping," Ivy said.

Wartortle and Golduck were tasked with keeping watch for the night, while Golbat hung upside down from the tree above in case of an emergency. Pikachu squeaked in Ash's arms and sneezed.

"Well, it could be worse," Ash said. "It could be just me and Gary having to snuggle up and share body heat."

Ivy made a sour face. "Gee, I'm glad I know my true value in your eyes."

They fell silent and tried to sleep, but the night passed fitfully, and they continued to shiver together. Gary held Ivy closer and she pressed her face into the crook of his neck. Aerodactyl, seemingly impervious to the chill, lay across their laps and sheltered itself with its broad wings but sadly provided no additional warmth. Gary sighed into Ivy's damp hair and prepared himself for a long, miserable night.

What had initially started out as a two-week hike south and downhill to sea level turned out to be nearly three weeks. The rains didn't let up for days, and Ash was pretty sure his skin would be permanently pruny. Misty's armor gave him adequate protection when they were sheltered, but out in the open, it was no more waterproof than Ivy's and Gary's armor. Survival turned into a game of how long they could stand being exposed to the elements before they had to rest and call on Houndour, Growlithe, or Charmeleon to flash fire up some damp wood and warm them up. Charmeleon, as Ash had suspected, was not keen on being helpful when there was nothing in it for him. His mood was even more dour in the rain.

But it wasn't all doom and gloom for the wandering trio. Aerodactyl and Munchlax both took to the rain with surprising alacrity, and neither of them were deterred from seeking out as much food as they could find. Ash would let Munchlax roam free while the trio breaked for lunch and for warmth, and the blue bear would devour everything from tall grass to low-hanging Pecha Berries to whatever Aerodactyl had managed to slaughter and couldn't eat fast enough.

"I think he's getting bigger," Ash commented on the sixth day of waterlogged travel. "Don't you think so?"

Gary grunted but said nothing further as he chewed on an energy bar.

"I think you're right," Ivy said. "How fast do they grow?"

Ash pulled out his Pokédex and scanned Munchlax as it wrested a hunk of Rattata meat from Aerodactyl, completely uncaring that the winged reptile hissed and snapped in anger at its pilfered prey.

"Says here... Huh, there's hardly anything about Munchlax." He paused before adding, "Lots on Snorlax, though. Looks like Professor Oak isn't sure about when they evolve, only that they have to eat a crap ton before they can get the energy to go through the process."

Ivy made a face. "So basically, Munchlax has to train itself to handle being a Snorlax? Wish I could make it my goal in life to just eat all the time."

"Hah, tell me about it."

"He may be harmlessly eating his weight ten times over now," Gary said. "But Snorlax do a hell of a lot more than just eat and sleep."

Ash snapped the Pokédex closed. "I'm counting on it."

Gary said nothing more to that, and they dropped the topic.

One good thing about the dismal weather was that most wild Pokémon were just as loathe to be caught up in it as the trio. Only the occasional Poliwag and Poliwhirl were out and about once they reached the lower elevations of Route Six, and they fled as soon as they spotted the human presence. Ash managed to scan them with the Pokédex and considered capturing one, but it wasn't worth the extra effort in this weather.

Well into the second week of travel, the rain finally let up and the skies lightened enough to reveal hints of the sun. Ash raised his arms to the sky and laughed. "About time!"

They were nearing the tapering ends of the woods that separated Lavender Town and its territories from Saffron, and the terrain became gradually more hilly as they went. Rice paddies sprang up to the south on seemingly every available patch of flat land, giving the place a tiered look as if a giant had run down the route and his

footprints became the shallow pools that hosted the rice trio walked along a higher path around the paddies, and the view was like nothing Ash had ever seen. It was so green it almost glistened after the deluge of rain.

"Check it out!" Ivy said, pointing among the gently rolling hills to the southwest.

A herd of wild Ponyta were galloping north and literally blazing the trail on all sides. Their fiery manes and tails scorched the tall grass as they ran together, and their piercing neighs carried on the breeze. Ivy recorded their images on her Pokédex.

"So cool," she said. "Can you imagine what it'd be like to ride one of those?"

"It'd be a hell of a lot faster than walking," Ash said, grinning.

"Rapidash are the fastest Pokémon known to us," Gary said. "If you think Ponyta's fast, you should see their evolved forms. Not even Dodrio can outrun them."

"That's *definitely* what we need," Ivy decided.

Gary chuckled. "Good luck catching one. Ponyta are still pretty fast, and they travel in herds. We'd have to take them all on at once just to have a chance at catching one of them."

"Hey, didn't Bill say something about there being a bunch of Ponyta and Rapidash on Cinnabar?" Ash said.

"Yeah, but they breed them. The wild ones are really tough to get ahold of, and they're usually not as strong as the trained ones, anyway."

Ash followed the galloping herd with his eyes as they veered east and disappeared behind the forest line. He couldn't help but laugh. "You know, even with all the crap we've been through, this is probably the coolest thing I've ever done. You'd never see any of this stuff in Pallet Town."

"I'll feel a lot cooler when we get to Vermilion," Gary said.

"Damn, I mean, Ponyta's one thing, I guess, but Misty's Gyarados was really awesome. I think it woulda beaten you if Nidoking didn't poison it."

Ivy smirked. "Speaking of Misty, what'd you think of her, Ash?"

"Me? I thought she was cool. I'm glad she was willing to help us."

Ivy's smirk widened. "Oh? Is that all you thought about her? Nothing you wanna share?"

Ash crossed his arms and thought about that. "Is there a right answer to that?"

Gary rolled his eyes. "Oh please, Ash, even I could tell you two were into each other."

"Hm? Oh," he said, remembering something. "Well, sure. Why wouldn't I be into a cute girl? And she saved my life."

"Well it's not like you're into Ivy, and she's saved your life before, too."

Ash and Ivy exchanged a look, and he grinned. "So true, Gary," he said. "I mean, Ivy's saved us both, right?"

Gary narrowed his eyes in suspicion when Ash put a hand on his shoulder next to Aerodactyl.

"And she's definitely cute. You pretty much just said it yourself. I mean, none of us've even showered in, like, two weeks, and you *still* can't stop staring at her."

Gary jutted out his lower lip and pushed Ash off of him. "Whatever, stop making shit up."

Ivy just laughed. "Oh, yeah, I hear the soft grunge b.o. look is *so* in right now. Thanks."

Ash sniffed Gary's shoulder, and Gary recoiled. "The hell—"

"Gary, you got that look *down*. In fact, you might be rockin' it way better than us."

Aerodactyl squawked when Gary reeled around abruptly. "Says the guy who still hasn't washed all the Primeape guts out of his armor. What's Misty gonna say when you bring it back to her?"

Ash burst out laughing. "Maybe if I'm lucky, she'll make me take it off."

Ivy shook her head. "Smooth, Ash. Real smooth."

Gary had nothing to say to that, so he turned away to hide his flush and stubbornly stalked ahead. Ash and Ivy hung back with Pikachu, Ivysaur, and Wigglytuff, laughing.

On their nineteenth day on the road, the hills finally opened up and revealed Vermilion City to the south nestled along the coast. At mid-morning, the tide was in and carried with it the many fishing boats returning with the early morning haul. A mammoth cruise ship was also docked in the harbor, undoubtedly stopped on its way west to Johto or perhaps north to Sinnoh. The red-brick buildings reflected the sunlight and lit up the place like a smoldering ember amidst the green hills and vast, ultramarine seascape.

"We made it," Ivy said.

"Finally," Gary said. "That took way too long."

The air was thick with humidity and salt, and Ash sucked in a deep breath. Pikachu squeaked happily on his shoulder as it took in the smells of the sea. "Now all that's left is for me to get us the next Badge."

Exhausted, sleep-deprived, and more road-weary than they'd possibly ever been, the trio trudged on heavy heels the last few miles to Vermilion and whatever the scarlet city had in store for them.

8. Vermilion City

Triumvirate, chapter 8: Vermilion City
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

By the time the trio made it into Vermilion City proper and found the Pokémon Center, where they would be renting a room for their stay, it was already late afternoon. Vermilion, like Cerulean, had no wall surrounding it what with the rolling hills acting as a natural buffer against both the elements and feral Pokémon in the north. Most buildings north of the harbor were built of red brick mined from Diglett's Cave on the eastern outskirts of the city. The couple hundred thousand people that lived in Vermilion worked the land or the sea in some capacity—as fishermen, sailors, engineers, farmers, or construction workers. The sounds of metal on metal filled the air as new construction projects, both in the city and in the harbor, revealed the citizens' diligent work ethic and tendency toward teamwork and collaboration.

The city itself had a tiered and cluttered appearance. Vermilion sat at the foot of the northern hills that separated it from Route Six, so entering from the north was a steep, downhill trek that followed winding cobblestone roads all the way down to sea level at the harbor. A lighthouse flickered far to the south, acting as a beacon for sailors out at sea during the midnight hours.

Once Ivy had negotiated a room rate for them—or strong armed, as Gary put it when he witnessed her flirt tactics with the young guy manning the reception desk—they unanimously decided to take it easy the rest of the day.

"I call shower first!" Ivy said as she raced upstairs.

"Not a chance!" Gary tried to shove past her as they ran up the stairs to the fourth floor room they would all be sharing.

Ash sighed. "Think we should tell 'em the showers are communal?"

Pikachu squeaked from its perch on Ash's shoulder, and he grinned.

"Nah, me neither."

They spent the rest of the afternoon and evening relaxing and eating real food after so long on the road with plans to check out the city in the morning. Ash lay in bed that night with his arm tucked around

Pikachu and thought about what it would be like to fight a Gym Leader. Ivy and Gary had both made it look sort of easy, though they both hid their feelings well in the midst of a fight. Seeing both their Pokémon staggering, barely holding on after was a reminder of how tough Gym Leaders really were. And something told Ash they would only get more difficult to defeat.

Whatever this Surge guy's deal is, I'll be ready.

He drifted off to sleep, the first decent one he'd had in almost a month, and dreamed of tomorrow. And tomorrow, as it turned out, came sooner than anyone expected.

"I think we should get a feel for the city before we head to the Gym," Gary said. "Make sure Team Rocket isn't here watching us."

Ivy agreed. "I wanna be ready for them next time."

"Aw, really? But I was lookin' forward to meeting Surge."

"You'll get your chance, Ash. But we have to think about our safety first."

Outnumbered, Ash begrudgingly accepted his companions' decision. "You know, I don't think I like this whole vibe you guys got going where you side against me."

Ivy rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. You two ganged up on me about Aerodactyl's egg."

"When're you both gonna learn that I'm usually right, no matter who sides with me or not?" Gary said.

Ivy tried to swat his arm, but he ducked out of the way and headed outside.

"God I hate that guy," she grumbled.

Ash rolled his eyes. "Sure you do. C'mon, let's get this over with."

After a quick breakfast at the Pokémon Center's cafeteria, the trio headed into Vermilion to begin their exploration. Now that they were properly walking around the city, the trio began to notice just how much construction was going on. Workers and Pokémon, mostly bulky fighters like Machoke, carried parts and tools, everything from two-by-fours to heavy sheets of metal. Ash glanced at the huge yellow

excavators and ADTs, noting the red-painted Silph logo plastered on the sides. Buildings were in various stages of construction and assembly, and engineers and architects hunched over plans together, oblivious to the world around them as they argued. The city itself seemed to be slowly crawling up the northern hills as though with a will all its own.

"Looks like Vermilion's been a busy town," Ash said.

"Maybe a little too busy."

Ash followed Ivy's gaze, but he couldn't figure out what had piqued her suspicion.

"What is it?"

"Why would Vermilion, a city that's obviously doing well for itself with natural gas rigs and Electrode generators, be building a power plant?"

Ash frowned and was about to question her when Gary tapped his shoulder and discreetly pointed in the opposite direction. Sure enough, three natural gas drills farther out at sea to the west were visibly pumping, and out east by Diglett's Cave stood a warehouse-looking structure topped with lightning rods that sparkled in the morning sunlight. Electrode and people in rubber suits were patrolling on the roof.

"Oh. That is kinda weird," Ash said.

Gary crossed his arms. "Most of Kanto's electricity comes from the Lavender Power Plant that was rebuilt after the war. Johto air raiders took out Lavender because they were targeting the Power Plant. It was a good move until Saffron showed up with an army of Fighters. But by the time they got there, the damage was done. Gramps said losing the Power Plant set us back a decade at least."

"But it's back up and running now?" Ivy said. "So again, it's weird that Vermilion would be building their own."

Ivy and Gary exchanged a look that left Ash wondering.

"Okay, guys, spill. What's so bad about building another plant? Maybe Vermilion just isn't getting enough power from Lavender."

Ivy looped her arm with Ash's and started walking. "That's exactly

what I'm thinking."

"Which means something's going on with the Lavender Power Plant," Gary said softly as they made their way down the main street toward the harbor. "And maybe Vermilion's trying to compensate. Misty mentioned how Saffron's new tariffs are hitting Lavender hard."

"Hey," Ash said, keeping his head down, "d'you think that family we saw on Route Five's got anything to do with this? They were coming from Lavender before they got attacked."

"Well, Misty said Lavender doesn't have a Gym, right?" Ivy said. "And now maybe they're having issues with the Power Plant. All this after getting leveled in the war that ended seventeen years ago. I'm not all that shocked that that family would be leaving Lavender."

Ash thought about the little boy the Mankey and Primeape had left untouched even in their rapacious hunger. "Yeah. But I got a really bad feeling it's a lot more than that."

"Let's worry about one thing at a time," Gary said. "We have to talk to Surge. Maybe he can tell us what the deal is with all the construction, but we have to get his buy-in for our mission."

Ivy smirked. "Oh, *our* mission? I'm thrilled you're taking my crusade to heart."

"Shut up. It's too early for you to start giving me a headache. Pesky woman."

She preened and looped her other arm through Gary's. He made a show about how uncomfortable he was with the whole ordeal even though he didn't push her away.

They walked as casually as they could toward the harbor, passing families, workers, and kids playing tag in the streets. It was so different from Pewter and Cerulean that Ash could hardly believe his eyes. This place was full of life, like the people here were invigorated by something in the very ground beneath their feet. After the natural tranquility of Cerulean and solemn silence of Pewter, hearing people again was a novel but welcome change. The trio wandered the narrow, winding roads, passing through a morning market filled with home-cooked breads and pies, fruit and vegetables farmed from Route Eleven to the east, and all manner of knick knacks and souvenirs. Locals were happy to help their customers, but there was an air of crispness about the scene that made Ash feel a little less welcome, like

everyone was running through the motions just because they had to, not because they wanted to. He recalled what Misty said about how the various cities in Kanto were largely self-sufficient, unwelcoming of outsiders.

It took them the better part of an hour to reach the harbor at their almost-jog downhill. It was already late morning, and the fish markets were closing down for the day, but the smell of salt and hickory filled the air as the snack stalls began opening for the lunch rush. Old women with weathered hands boiled, grilled, marinated, and deep fried Seaking fillets, Octillery tentacles, and the occasional Feebass steaks imported from Hoenn far to the east. The smells were mouthwatering and reminded Ash of the village festivals he and Gary used to attend when they were kids back in Pallet Town before Gary left to train in Cianwood City.

The thought made him a little nostalgic, and he broke from the trio to seek out one of the vendors selling grilled octopus.

"It hasn't even been two hours since we had breakfast," Gary pointed out.

Ash popped a slice of lemon-marinated tentacle in his mouth with a toothpick. "What's that got to do with anything?"

Ivy poked one of the tentacles with a toothpick and stole it before Ash could stop her. "Wow, this is pretty good."

"We used to have this stuff back in Pallet Town during the summer festivals," Ash said. "They made it a little different, but the gist is the same."

Pikachu swiped a piece of food with a nimble paw and happily munched on it.

"Festival?"

"Yeah, you know, with games for little kids, a bunch of vendor food like this stuff, dancing... Wait, you've been a festival before, right?"

Ivy averted her gaze toward the harbor and the vast sea beyond. She smiled brightly. "I guess not. Team Rocket never threw any, you know?"

Ash watched her profile, not liking that smile. "Well, what'd you do for fun? You know, when you and Marco had free time?"

Her smile faded and she shrugged. "We didn't really have free time." She paused before adding, "But I like being busy. Gives me something to do."

Ash caught Gary's eye behind her, but he looked away.

"C'mon," Gary said, walking off to the west. "The Gym's that way."

Ivy caught up to him and they walked side by side, neither saying a word. Ash threw the rest of the grilled octopus in a trash bin on the street corner and shoved his hands in his pockets. He'd lost his appetite.

The Gym was another twenty minutes of walking away. It was a huge, brick warehouse situated on its own small peninsula with no other buildings or dwellings within two hundred yards of it. The few windows it had were close to the roof and impossible to see into from the ground level. The word 'Gym' was painted in faded, black letters on the face of the warehouse. If not for its unmistakeable isolation from the rest of the city, Ash would have guessed it was just another warehouse among the many in Vermilion.

"This is it," Gary said. "You guys ready?"

"Hell yeah," Ivy said. "Let's go, we wasted enough time getting here as it is."

They looked back at Ash expectantly, and he continued to look up at the faded paint.

"What d'you think, Pikachu? Ready for some action?"

The yellow rodent squeaked and its cheeks darkened with pent up static that made Ash's hair stand on end.

"Let's just talk to him first," Gary reminded the group. "Maybe we can swing this without resorting to force."

Ash leveled a stare at his traveling companions. "Either way, I'm ready."

Ivy opened the double doors for them. Inside beyond the foyer, the building looked like one big, open room. There were a few doors on the left wall, but they were all closed. Ash guessed that they might lead to the living quarters or storage. But immediately past the entrance, the main room arrested his attention. It was a wide, open

space built directly out of the ground, which was a sandy beach like the ground outside. Strange machines were spaced at equidistant locations in the sand, long, metal cones with thick, copper rings wrapped around their lengths and suspended at the tops in coiled halos. Ash didn't recognize them, but they had a futuristic look to them, like something out of a sci-fi movie.

"Oi, you're not supposed to be in here."

A woman in her late twenties or early thirties clad entirely in green camouflage and combat boots removed her aviators and marched up to the trio. Her blond hair was pulled back into a severe, high ponytail and her light eyes were narrowed in suspicion.

"We're here to speak with the Gym Leader," Ivy said, stepping forward. "Where is he?"

The woman reached for a Pokéball at her belt but didn't release it. "I said, you're not supposed to be here. If I have to, I'll forcibly escort you off the premises."

"Hey, whoa, chill," Ash said. "We just wanna talk to Surge. We're not here to cause trouble."

The woman glared at Ash. "That's *Lieutenant* Surge to you, civilian."

"Sorry, who're you, exactly?" Gary said. "And since when are civilians not welcome here? Gyms exist to keep people safe, and that includes hearing out complaints or problems."

"Oh, so now you got a problem?"

"You know what? I don't like your attitude," Ivy said. "You better tell us where the hell Surge is unless *you* wanna be forcibly escorted out by *me*."

The woman's jaw fell open in shock and offense at Ivy's audacity, but she quickly shut it. "How dare you speak to me like that! You don't know your place, civilian."

"Ivy," Gary warned.

But she ignored him. "Oh, and this is the part where you show me, right?" She reached for Umbreon's Pokéball.

"Hey, what's going on out here?"

A middle-aged man in oil-stained jeans, a reflective vest, and an orange hardhat jogged toward them.

"Stay back, Bernie. These civilians're trying to pick a fight."

"What? You started it!" Ash said.

Bernie put a hand on the woman's shoulder. "Sandra, I think I can take it from here, thanks."

"You don't have that authority."

"No, but I do."

Everyone turned to see a short, stocky man dressed similarly to Sandra in green camo pants, a black wife beater, and combat boots approaching. The silver dog tags around his neck clinked softly with each heavy step he took. Ash couldn't help but notice the guy's biceps —they had to be at least twice as thick as his own and they were riddled with old scars and an array of tattoos. Sandra immediately backed off and stood to attention. She saluted the newcomer stiffly.

"Sir," she said.

Bernie sighed and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Sorry to disturb your training, Lieutenant. From what I heard, looks like you got visitors."

"Lt. Surge?" Gary said evenly.

Surge leveled the three of them with an unreadable gaze. "That's me."

Whoa.

Despite the fact that Surge was a good few inches shorter than him, Ash couldn't help but feel small in his presence. There was something about his presence that made the air thicker, harder to breathe, like he sucked all the oxygen out of the room. Perhaps most striking of all, though, was the thick, six-inch scar that tore across Surge's face from his forehead, over his nose and temple, and ending just under his left jaw line. Blond stubble grew around it, but he maintained a clean-shaven look otherwise. Aviators matching Sandra's sat atop his wild, blond hair. Very suddenly, the last thing Ash wanted to do was get on Surge's bad side.

"It ain't nice to stare, boy," Surge said all of a sudden.

Ash flushed and averted his gaze. "S-Sorry, I didn't mean anything."

Surge's gaze lingered on Pikachu, who sat atop Ash's shoulder. "That your Pikachu?"

Ash looked up. "Huh? Oh, yeah."

"Yes," he said a little more forcefully. "Or no. That's what you say when someone asks you a question. None of that stutterin' bullshit."

Ash was stunned for a moment, unable to say anything to that, but Gary spoke up.

"Lt. Surge," he began. "Is there somewhere we can talk in private? We have an important proposition for you."

Surge crossed his arms and sized up the trio. "That so? What kinda proposition?"

"The kind you'll wanna hear in private," Ivy snapped.

Surge shifted his penetrating stare to her, but she glared right back. Ash felt a chill run up his spine as he wondered where the hell Ivy got off talking back to Gym Leaders all the time.

Sandra broke her statuesque mask to flinch in disgust at Ivy's lack of decorum.

Surge surprised everyone and laughed, but Ash only shivered more. "You know, as Gym Leader I got a legal right to strike dead anyone who comes in my Gym and threatens me and my subordinates' safety. Now I'm gonna ask y'again, and this time I want an answer, or you won't like what I do next."

"Fine," Gary said. "But it's your decision to trust these people with what we're about to tell you, as long as we're clear."

Surge said nothing, and Gary took that as a silent permission to continue or else.

"We want your support in forcibly removing Team Rocket and all their agents from Kanto."

Surge's eyes flashed with something, but it was too fast for Ash to tell what he might be thinking. "Team Rocket, you say?"

"Yes," Ivy said, pronouncing the word so clearly it almost hurt Ash's

ears. "We already have Pewter's and Cerulean's guarantee of support when the time comes."

She and Gary each showed him their hard earned Boulder and Cascade Badges, but Surge didn't even bother glancing at them.

"You want my guarantee of support," he said slowly.

"That's right," Gary said.

"Why?"

Ash looked between Ivy and Gary.

"We just told you," Ivy said, the irritation evident in her tone. "To get rid of Team Rocket."

"Why should I get rid of Team Rocket?"

Gary narrowed his eyes. "Surely you know about the municipal crises in Pewter and Viridian. We haven't traveled much up until this point, but from what we can tell, Team Rocket's influence is spreading and making a lot of problems for everyone."

"Not here, they're not. So why should I get rid of a problem that ain't mine?"

Ivy stepped forward and got in his face. "Because if you don't, they'll destroy you from the inside out."

Oh shit.

Ash looked on as Ivy and Surge faced off. Something in the air between them shifted, and all of a sudden Surge lashed out to smack her across the face. Ivy was fast, though, and caught his wrist. She used his momentum to twist it, intending to snap in, but Surge shifted to the side and used his free hand to hit her in the throat with the heel of his palm. Ivy let the hit graze her and twirled around him, but the dodge forced her to let go of his wrist. Silence descended for a few breaths as they faced each other again, this time their positions switched. Gary had Scyther's Pokéball in his hand ready to go.

Surge spat on the sand. "For someone so hell bent on givin' Team Rocket the boot, you sure know how to fight like those weasels."

At the insinuation, Sandra immediately drew the knife at her hip and positioned herself next to Surge. Bernie backed away, unwilling to get

caught up in a fight.

"You sound like you speak from experience," Ivy said.

Surge grunted and walked back into the Gym without a second look back. "Get the hell outta my Gym, and don't come back."

"What?"

Gary was about to protest, but Sandra released the Pokéball she'd been holding. A spherical Pokémon rolled on the sand and began to spark. Ivy and Gary backed away from the Voltorb, wary of the volatile Pokémon's reputation for self-destructing on command. Meanwhile, Surge was retreating deeper into his Gym. Ash threw caution to the wind and sprinted after him.

"Ash!" Gary shouted.

Sandra swore, but between Gary and Ivy on one side and Ash on the other, she couldn't split Voltorb's attention.

"Surge!" Ash bellowed, skidding to a halt in the thick sand. Pikachu leaped from his shoulder and began to spark in anticipation. "Stop right there!"

Surge stopped and spared Ash a glance over his shoulder. "Kid, you *don't* wanna piss me off."

"Too bad. We came here for your support, and we're not leaving without it."

Surge turned around fully and sized Ash up. "Support? Don't make me laugh. No on in their right mind would support three punk kids who think they can challenge Team Rocket. You're all fuckin' delusional."

"But we already got Brock of Pewter and Misty of Cerulean to agree to help us," Ash said. "Doesn't that mean anything to you? They're Gym Leaders, too."

Surge threw back his head and laughed. "You really are pathetic, kid. You can't possibly compare me to those runts. It's insulting."

"Ash!" Ivy shouted.

"Stay back!" Sandra held out an arm and Voltorb began to spark. It was enough to stay Gary's hand from making any sudden moves.

Bernie hung off to the side, unwilling to get too close to Surge and Ash but still lingering.

"So you're a Team Rocket sympathizer, then?" Ash said. "I can't think of any other reason why you'd be so afraid to stand up to them."

Surge clenched his fists, and it was all Ash could do not to shrink away and get to safety. He couldn't fight like Ivy could.

"You got a lotta nerve comin' into *my* Gym and mouthing off like you got everything figured out. Team Rocket ain't my problem, and I ain't about to make 'em my problem."

"Oh, yeah?" *Keep diggin' that grave, Ash, you're already halfway there.* "So what're you gonna do when they get here, if they're not already? They'll sneak up on you and you won't even know it. Just like what's happening in Saffron."

Surge narrowed his eyes. "Saffron? No one knows what's happening in Saffron, least of all some punk ass kid."

"Oh, so you're totally okay with Saffron's new tariffs, huh? I heard they're buyin' up all your farmland, too. If you ask me, I'd say Vermilion's getting the squeeze and you don't wanna admit it. Somethin' bad's going on, and like it or not, Vermilion's right in the middle of it. I got it on good authority that Team Rocket's everywhere, that they have a plan to take over all of Kanto, and you're just one guy. How the hell d'you know who is and isn't in your city? How can you possibly stand up for all the people in Vermilion alone? And when it's too late and they start to take over like they did in Viridian, then what're you gonna do, huh? Pray that Cerulean and Pewter'll help you outta the goodness of their hearts? Now who's delusional?"

Surge marched right up to Ash and grabbed him by the collar. He moved so fast that Ash barely had time to react. Pikachu squeaked and started to power up a Thundershock, but Surge glared down at the little rodent and scared it half to death.

"*Sit* down," Surge commanded.

Pikachu, perhaps out of sheer terror or intimidation, actually faltered and let its electricity die out. Ash could only marvel in shock, and soon Surge's focus was back on him.

"I don't know who the hell you think you are, kid, but *no one* comes into *my* Gym and threatens me or mine."

Ash let his body go limp in Surge's grip, but he held the older man's gaze in a challenge. "It's not a threat, it's just the facts. You're gonna kill me over facts?"

"Maybe just for fun."

"Come *on*! Team Rocket's the real enemy, not some *kid* like me." Ash squeezed Surge's meaty wrist, imploring him to understand. "I know you know that, I can see it in your eyes. You know I'm telling the truth here. Misty said you got a reputation for being fair and honest. So look me in the eye and tell me you don't think Team Rocket's a threat to Vermilion, either now or in the future."

Surge threw Ash on the ground hard, but the sand cushioned his fall. Pikachu immediately pawed at his side in worry.

"Team Rocket *is* a threat to Vermilion," Bernie said.

Ash and Surge both turned on the portly engineer, who put up his gloved hands in a placating gesture. Surge spat in the sand again.

"Bernie," Surge said in warning.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but this is exactly what we've been talkin' about for months. You said yourself we gotta wait for the opportune moment, well, I think this's it. Nobody else's come here actually wantin' to *stop* Team Rocket."

"Ash, what the hell?" Ivy called from the other side of the room where Sandra still had Gary and her held up.

"So you mean, Team Rocket *was* here tryna buy you out," Ash said.

Surge crossed his arms. "That ain't none of your beeswax, kid."

Ash had just about had it. "I just wanna help! Please, just gimme a chance to prove I can, that's all I'm asking."

"Prove? What the hell d'you think you can do? Even if you really did just wanna help, which is bullshit, why should I even want your help? I'm a *Gym Leader* chosen by the Elite Four and a decorated war veteran who's been winnin' battles since before you were suckin' on your mama's teat. What the fuck can you do besides fall on your ass like you did just now?"

Ash set his jaw and got to his feet. He dusted himself off and held out

an arm for Pikachu to crawl back up to his shoulder. "All I'm asking for is a shot. If you've won so many victories, then let's see if you can beat me in a Pokémon battle. If I win, you promise to support our mission. If I lose, we'll be outta your hair forever."

"Lieutenant," Bernie tried again. "I at least think we should hear the boy out. Since we got that SOS from the folks in Lavender, things've been—"

"Enough," Surge interrupted Bernie before he could leak more information.

Ash's ears perked up at the mention of Lavender, but before he could get a word in edgewise, Surge continued.

"This is what I hate about your generation. You think you can come in here like you're hot shit or somethin' 'cause maybe you beat a few runts back in whatever shit hole you crawled outta. Then you come in here 'n disrespect me like you and me're equals. You think I run an island here? That I'm cuttin' Vermilion off from the rest of the world? That I don't know what's goin' on in my own backyard? You got *no idea* the shit I've done for this country and all the scumbags livin' in it. It's a hell of a lot more'n you and yours ever did, I promise you that."

"Then accept my challenge. I'm not here to disrespect you or question your authority. I'm asking you to give me a chance. What've you got to lose, really? I'm just a nobody, right?"

Surge was silent for a moment.

"Lieutenant, I don't think we should disregard this, especially not with all that's been happening lately," Bernie said.

Ash spared the engineer a glance, wondering what exactly that meant.

"Y'know, I challenged a Gym Leader once before, too," Surge said. "I was a little younger'n you, some hotshot cadet with a hard-on for blood and action. I fought with my best, and you know what I got?"

Surge traced the scar that bisected his face. Ash's mouth went dry at the implication.

"I bet Blaine looked at me then like I'm lookin' at you now. He accepted my challenge, and he killed my best Pokémon. Then he went after me, 'cause that's war, and that's the only reason to fight. There ain't no glamor or glory in it, just death and luck. You fight til there

ain't nothin' and no one left standing. Back then, I thought it was a friendly match, we bein' on the same side and all. But he never called off his Magmar, and I never saw the thing comin'."

Bernie remained silent as Surge spoke, and Ash dared not even breathe to interrupt him.

"Blaine taught me the most important lesson I ever learned that day. You probably came in here thinkin' we'd do a nice ol' Pokémon battle, duke it out one-on-one til one side couldn't go on, then throw back a couple cold ones together after. But that ain't how I roll. That ain't how the guys out there," he pointed to the wall in the direction of the western sea, toward Johto, "roll. They go for the jugular 'cause they know you never fuckin' *stop*, or you die. You think you wanna fight me?" Surge spat into the sand again. "You don't even know the meaning of the word."

That little voice in Ash's head telling him to back off was screaming at him now.

Get out. Get out now. He really will kill you.

A part of Ash wanted nothing more than to duck his head and run. But the uncomfortable tightness down his back and arms was a constant reminder of his first taste of a real fight, where anything goes and to lose means a fate more damning than death. The scars still burned with phantom pain now and then, even on the road to Vermilion when he was shivering in the damp cold. They still burned, and he still dreamed about that aberrant Rhydon as it crushed Wartortle with its Horn Drill. As it roasted him alive in his armor, merciless. Never stopping.

"Do you accept my challenge or not?" Ash said softly.

Surge chuckled to himself. "You got death in your bones, kid. I can smell it on you. Fine, have it your way. You be here tomorrow morning at oh-six-hundred sharp." He glanced briefly at Pikachu, and his lip curled in disdain. "And bring your best. You're gonna need it."

He spared Ash one last, hard look and stormed off toward one of the doors. Bernie nodded to Ash before going after his boss.

"Sandra!" Surge barked. "Show 'em out."

Ash wandered back to Gary and Ivy, and Sandra was happy to all but throw them out of the Gym, her Voltorb rolling along beside her to

make a point.

"God, Ash, what the hell happened?" Ivy said.

"Did he accept the challenge?" Gary asked.

Ash folded his hands together, only now realizing they were shaking. "Yeah. Yeah, he did."

Ash lay in bed that night, unable to sleep. Pikachu was curled up on his chest snoozing, and Gary and Ivy had fallen asleep hours ago. He'd relayed his conversation with Surge to them, and Gary, predictably, was against Ash going through with the fight. Ivy was less than enthusiastic, too, but they needed Surge's support and it sounded like violence was the only answer in this case. It didn't matter what they thought, though; Ash had already convinced himself he was doing this.

Is this what you meant, Misty? When you said we needed to learn how to fight for real?

He sighed and raised his left arm over his head. With his right hand, he ran his fingers over the tight scar tissue on his underarms. He never said a word about them to Gary or Ivy, though he suspected they knew his condition since finding him in Bill's care. Ash had never been particularly vain, but the tightness bothered him a little. Like invisible hands were tying him down, tethering him to something unseen.

"*You got death in your bones, kid."*

Ash scratched Pikachu's fur, and the little rodent shifted in its slumber. He only had a few hours before he was due back at the Gym, and already he knew he wouldn't be getting much sleep tonight. But it didn't bother him. He looked to his right, were Ivy and Gary's bunk bed was pushed against the opposite wall.

It has to be me, he thought.

They wouldn't stand a chance against Surge, not as they were. Not alone.

It has to be me.

Not for fault of hubris or delusions of grandeur—Ash had none growing up second best in everything. But there was one thing he had

that they didn't, and it was his only trump card against Surge.

He just hoped it would be enough.

He thought he would be nervous, but Ash barely noticed his own anxiety. He stood outside the Gym's double doors with Ivy and Gary and just breathed.

"At least lemme loan you Umbreon," Ivy said. "I dunno how you did it last time, but she seems to be okay listening to you, and she's strong."

"Thanks, but I'll be fine."

"You don't have to do this," Gary said. "We can find another way."

"No, we can't. We need Surge's support, and this is the only way he'll listen." He smirked at Gary and pulled his cap down lower over his forehead. "I called this Gym, so there's no way in hell I'm backin' out now."

A moment of silence passed between the trio before Gary said, "If he does anything out of line, I'm coming in there after you."

"Aw, c'mon, man, have a little faith. You might be stronger than me," Ash said, facing the Gym once more, "but I was always a hell of a lot less predictable."

Ivy opened the doors for them again, and the trio went inside. Surge was waiting for them in the main area flanked by Bernie and Sandra.

"You're on time," he said. "I s'pose that's a small accomplishment by itself."

Ivy and Gary hung back to watch the battle from a safe vantage, while Ash crossed the sandy arena to Surge. "When do we start?"

Surge jerked his head toward Bernie, who nodded and plodded to the back of the arena to fiddle with some kind of fuse box. Sandra saluted her Lieutenant and joined Gary and Ivy at the sidelines out of the sand. Pikachu sniffed the air, its fur standing on end as it tensed in anticipation of whatever was to come.

"I told you before, you dunno what it really means to fight. Today, you're gonna learn. I don't like kids, and I sure as hell don't consider myself the type to pass things on to the next ungrateful generation.

But I admit, there's somethin' about you that got me thinkin'." He reached for two Pokéballs at his belt and waved them in front of Ash. "I thought about what you said yesterday, so here's my deal: I'll hear y'out if you can survive this."

"I'll do a little more than survive."

Surge grinned. "No, you won't. War ain't about winnin' so much as stayin' alive long enough to be the last man standing. Anything goes in war, kid, and don't you forget that. Those Team Rocket fellas? Most of 'em're your age, don't know shit about war or what it means to earn the right to live. Since you're here now, I figure you at least ain't as shitbrained as them. So I'll give you a chance, like you wanted."

"As long as we have a deal, I'll accept any terms you want."

Surge threw his head back and guffawed. "Ain't no terms, kid. Just don't *die*. If you can do that, we'll talk."

He showed Ash his back then and walked across the arena to the far side. Pikachu jumped down from Ash's shoulder, ready for action.

"Okay, buddy," he said. "This is gonna be a little different from what we're used to. Just follow my lead."

Pikachu squeaked in acknowledgement, and its cheeks sparked with pent up electricity. Surge took up a position on the opposite side of the arena and tossed out two Pokéballs that flashed with bright light. When the glare faded, Ash found himself staring down a hefty Raichu and an admittedly terrifying Electabuzz that reached Surge's chest in height. The cat-like Pokémon ambled on its hind legs, as hulking as a bear, but its fangs dripped saliva and its thick, striped fur crackled with electricity. Pikachu was taken with Surge's Raichu and had gone very still.

Electric types, Ash thought. *Fitting.*

Bernie finished whatever he'd been doing with the fuse box, and suddenly a loud *crack* resounded through the high-ceilinged arena. The many futuristic rods that popped up in the sand burst to life with a spark of electricity and crackled, like magic. Purple lightning bolts danced up and down their lengths and congregated around the copper halos. Sometimes the bolts jumped from one rod to the other, but most alarming was when they shot off errant bolts of lightning that struck the sand and drew misshapen fulgurite from its depths.

"In war, you gotta be aware that shit's happenin' all around you," Surge called. "People die just as easily from direct hits as they do from bein' in the wrong spot at the wrong time."

Ash's mouth went dry as the air in the room began to pop and hiss with the crackling lightning jumping around. He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, and the smell of ozone became almost unbearable.

"Kick his ass!" Ivy shouted from the sidelines. "Go, Ash!"

He stifled a laugh. *Do I sound like that from the sidelines?*

But he appreciated the encouragement—he would need it once this got started. Ash reached for the lone Ultra Ball at his belt and released a very high-strung Charmeleon onto the sand. It immediately zeroed in on Pikachu and its maw smoked, but Ash laid his palm flat on Charmeleon's broad, scaly back.

"I promised you a fight," he said. "So you're gonna get the fight of your life with them."

Charmeleon snapped its jaws and averted its attention across the arena to Raichu and Electabuzz. Its yellow eyes narrowed to slits, and its forked tongue lolled out of its mouth, tasting the air.

"Obey me if you wanna win."

Charmeleon snarled and glared back at Ash, but Ash held the orange lizard's threatening gaze. It was hard to tell if Pokémon ever understood exactly what they were told, but most could understand the emotion behind people's words and commands. Ash only hoped Charmeleon would understand how much was riding on this.

Lightning from one of the rods struck just in front of Charmeleon and startled the lizard. Out of nowhere, Surge's Raichu appeared in the aftermath of the jolt and tackled Charmeleon, sending it tumbling through the sand. The battle had begun without so much as a friendly warning. Pikachu squeaked angrily and leaped at Raichu, but Electabuzz was waiting with a Thunderpunch that sent Pikachu flying into one of the lightning rods, causing it to spark and electrocute Pikachu in the process.

Then the Electabuzz came after Ash.

"Look out!" Gary shouted from the sidelines.

It was all Ash could do to roll out of the way of another Thunderpunch that connected with the sand Ash had been standing on just a moment ago. When Electabuzz pulled its fist away, the sand had congealed into liquid glass that hardened before Ash's eyes. He didn't stick around to admire it, though.

"Charmeleon!"

The orange lizard had recovered and ran at Electabuzz, head lowered. Electabuzz put its meaty hands up, but it was too slow to dodge adequately and took Charmeleon's Headbutt full force. The two Pokémon rolled over one another through the sand. Raichu hissed and powered up a powerful Thunder attack that happened to catch an errant lightning bolt from one of the rods.

Ash's eyes widened at the sight. "Double Team!"

He barely finished the command as he sprinted as quickly as he could to safety. Pikachu took off in a blur of yellow just as Raichu erupted in pale light. A ten foot radius of sand exploded with energy, and Ash took some of the aftershock in the back, causing him to topple over. His armor was thick and lined with rubber, but the air was getting a little hard to breathe with all the static saturating it.

He wasn't kidding when he meant war.

Ash had known that from the beginning, but knowing was nothing like living it first hand. Surge himself was crouched on the ground, watching for anything that could endanger his person.

"Spark," he commanded.

Electabuzz began to sparkle with electricity.

"Charmeleon, get outta there!"

Charmeleon was busy trying to sink its teeth into Electabuzz and ignored Ash's command. It suffered a swift electrocution as a result and shrieked in pain. Smoking, Charmeleon crumpled to the ground and shook.

"Ram it, Pikachu!"

Pikachu darted across the electrified battlefield and slammed into Electabuzz, knocking it into one of the lightning rods with a Quick Attack. Electabuzz convulsed with electricity on impact, but because

of its affinity, it suffered only minor damage.

"Eyes open, kid," Surge said.

No sooner had Surge said that than a bolt of purple lightning zigzagged toward Ash and struck the sand at his feet. Ash grunted in pain and was pushed back a few feet, where he landed in the sand with a *thud*. His right leg suffered an electric burn and bled from newly inflamed and bursting welts through a crack in his armor.

"Holy shit," Ivy said from the sidelines. "This is bad. If Ash gets hit, he could die."

Gary watched with his jaw set. "I'll intervene before that can happen."

Ivy grabbed his hand. "I've fought men like Surge before. He's the real deal. He's not gonna give Ash any breaks."

Think, Ash, think!

He racked his brain for some solution, something that could give him an edge. But Raichu was already closing in before he could finish the thought.

"Pikachu!"

Pikachu zoomed in front of Ash like lightning itself and caught Raichu's Thunder attack, redirecting it to a safe distance from Ash on pure instinct. The sand exploded in fulgurite fingers that seemed to leap from the ground with sentient will. Ash had no time to admire Pikachu's resilience as he ran to put some distance between Raichu and himself.

Charmeleon had recovered, the stubborn bastard, and was now on all fours and out for revenge. Its thick scales had protected it from the worst of the electrocution, but in between them blood seeped in thin rivulets and stained the sand. Charmeleon seemed not to notice.

"Burn it!" Ash shouted.

Charmeleon, by some miracle of common sense, obeyed and loosed a Flamethrower almost as thick as the Rhydon's that had nearly killed Ash back in Mt. Moon. Electabuzz had the sense to roll out of the way just in time, but its back fur ended up getting singed and it snarled in anger and pain. The lightning rod nearest it ejected a thunderbolt that struck the sand not twenty feet away with a *crack*.

They're all random, Ash thought.

"Keep moving!" he shouted, moving himself once more and ignoring the blistering pain in his leg that forced him to limp.

This time, Charmeleon was quick to obey and loped on all fours closer to Surge, which prompted Raichu to give chase in order to protect its master. Pikachu also took off at blinding speed in another Double Team that eluded Electabuzz's best efforts.

This place is a playground for them.

How to beat someone on their own turf? Ash mulled over this thought as he hobbled as quickly as he could to the edge of the sand.

"Double Thunder," Surge said.

Ash barely had time to think before Raichu and Electabuzz exploded in a scintillating display of raw power that connected with the lightning rods and prepared to spread across the arena.

"Pikachu, Charge! Protect Charmeleon!"

The light blinded Ash momentarily. His hair was standing on end, and his eyes were itchy and dry in the aftermath. But when the glare faded, Charmeleon was crouched, protecting itself, and Pikachu stood on its shoulders, sparking with static. Somehow, they had evaded the brunt of the devastating attack.

Pikachu squeaked angrily as its cheeks buzzed with an overdose of power. Charmeleon was hunched over, having seen better days, but it was still standing and still thirsting for blood, its injuries only fueling its desire to fight. All around them, a ring of fulgurite had sprung up like frozen lava where the double Thunder had been redirected by Pikachu.

That's it.

"Stay together!" Ash shouted. "And keep the Flamethrowers coming!"

Charmeleon roared and stamped the ground in fury before mustering up more fire from its belly. Pikachu ran alongside Charmeleon, circling it in quick loops.

"Take 'em out, Electabuzz!" Surge commanded.

Electabuzz snarled and began to charge toward Charmeleon, its fists

sparking with electricity.

"Aim for the sand!" Ash said.

Charmeleon obeyed and loosed a molten column of fire at the ground in front of Electabuzz. The sand superheated and congealed into magma that rose up in a great wave of molten glass. Electabuzz faltered and skidded awkwardly to avoid the worst of the attack, but it was still splashed with liquid glass and roared in pain when the stuff hardened over cooked flesh and fur. Meanwhile, Ash kept an eye on Raichu and the many lightning rods around the arena as they idled in various stages of power-up and power-down.

If I can just get the timing right...

"Pikachu, on my mark!"

Pikachu continued tailing Charmeleon, who had turned its sights on Raichu as the tubby rodent got ready to fire off another shell-shocking Thunder attack.

"What're you doing?" Gary asked more to himself than to Ash.

Sandra observed the battle nearby, curiously silent, but she glanced briefly at Gary. Ivy shook her head.

"Think he's got a strategy?" Ivy asked.

"Not a chance. But he's got something."

"Well he better pull it off fast before—"

Raichu fired off its Thunder attack at Charmeleon.

"Now!"

Pikachu leaped to do Ash's bidding and flew over Charmeleon's head. Like a moving lightning rod, it attracted Raichu's Thunder and absorbed the brunt of the attack, giving Charmeleon time to scramble to safety.

"Take it out, Charmeleon!"

Charmeleon roared and belched black smoke as it charged at the recovering Raichu. The Flamethrower hit it in gut and sent it flying. Surge lunged forward and caught Raichu before it could smash into a lightning rod that was about to blow. He rolled with his Pokémon in

the sand, snuffing out the embers that ate at Raichu's flesh.

"Thunderpunch!" he bit out.

Electabuzz let out a guttural bellow and took to the ground on all fours as its front paws began to spark with electricity. Ash was not about to let it sneak up on his Pokémon, though, and ran as quickly as he could to intercept it. He snatched up a handful of sand and flung it at Electabuzz.

"Over here!"

The sand hit Electabuzz in the eyes, and it growled. Ash's victory was short-lived when the big cat changed trajectory, shook out its needled fur, and charged straight for him.

That's it, come and get me.

Electabuzz was a big Pokémon and certainly not the fastest, but with a bum leg and the threat of instant death by electrocution, the odds were not in Ash's favor. He fell in between two lightning rods that snapped and crackled with electricity. The purple sparks jumped out at him and danced along his armor, where the rubber lining repelled them from anything vital. Electabuzz reared up on its hind legs and clenched its double Thunderpunch fists, ready to strike.

Ash held out an arm and shouted, "Blast it!"

In a blur of color, Pikachu alighted on Ash's outstretched arm and leaped into the air. The electricity it had charged and absorbed from Surge's Pokémon erupted from its cheeks just as the two lightning rods exploded with purple light and struck Pikachu. Electabuzz reeled back from the superpowered Thunder, but Charmeleon was waiting for it with another Flamethrower aimed at the sand. The fire instantly melted the sand and kicked up a wave of glass that oxidized and hardened mid-arc. Electabuzz's heavy body crashed into the still-hot glass and shattered it, suffering a multitude of lacerations in the process. When Pikachu's supercharged Thunder slammed into it, Electabuzz seized and hit the ground, unmoving and smoking from its bleeding wounds.

Charmeleon slumped on all fours, exhausted and bleeding from a multitude of blisters that swelled in between its scales. Pikachu fell to the ground, totally spent after the huge amount of electricity it had just absorbed and discharged all at once. Ash himself was crouched on all fours, armor smoking and the ends of his hair burned to a crisp.

His exposed hands and fingers bloomed angry, red blisters where he'd used them to shield his more vulnerable face and neck. His ears were ringing, and his vision was shot to hell from the fulgent burst of light Pikachu had emitted just moments ago. In pain and nearly blind, it was all Ash could do to keep it together. He thought he heard someone calling his name, but he didn't trust his ears.

A hand closed around the back of his neck and hauled him up out of the sand. Surge held him up like he was a rag doll and glared. Ash blinked to recover his vision. Slowly, the world came back into focus. The lightning rods still cracked and snapped with electricity, but Surge stood in the middle of it all, like he fed off the stuff. The sand at Ash's feet was no longer sand, but a deep vein of fulgurite that angled away from him in all directions like a lightning bolt frozen in time. Electabuzz lay several yards away, passed out and bleeding. It bore thick shards of sand-glass in its striped hide, the remains of Charmeleon's molten wave. Surge's Raichu, however, was still conscious despite its raw, third-degree burns, and squatted next to its trainer, ready to attack.

"If this were a real war, I'd snap your neck right now," Surge said.

Charmeleon, perhaps sensing the threat in Surge's voice, bared its teeth in a bloody grin and leaked black smoke. Raichu, having tasted its fire once already, backed away closer to Surge.

Ash coughed. "If this were a real war, you'd be dead."

Surge looked down at Ash's swollen hands, where he had a hunting knife pressed in between Surge's third and fourth ribs. Silence stretched for a moment between them, and Ash fought with all his might to keep his eyes open and focused. The next thing he knew, he was back on the ground, flat on his back where Surge had dropped him. The knife clattered over the fulgurite, out of reach. More footsteps drew closer, and something very warm crawled up next to him. A storm raged all around him where the lightning rods blasted their thunder across the arena.

The backs of his eyelids danced with resplendent thunderbolts, and Ash succumbed to a deep, heavy slumber.

Waking was like remembering to breathe after so long without air. Ash choked and gasped for breath, still tasting acrid ozone on the back of his tongue. His eyes stung and his nose leaked snot, which he tried

to wipe away with his sleeve only to find he didn't have one.

"Ash!"

He recognized Ivy's voice and felt her cool touch on his bare arm and forehead. His vision was still a little blurry with sleep, but he sniffled and blinked rapidly to clear his eyes. She looked down at him, brow furrowed in worry.

"Where—" He broke out into a coughing fit when he tried to speak.

Another figure appeared overhead and slipped an arm behind his shoulders. When the spasm passed, Ash found a glass of water pressed against his lips, and he eagerly downed it as fast as he could. Gary waited for him to finish before returning the glass to the nightstand.

"Where am I?" he managed.

Gary fixed him with a hard look. "Still in the Gym. Surge has a small medical ward here. Don't worry, I got Pikachu and Charmeleon to the Pokémon Center."

"Took him like ten minutes to get past Charmeleon so we could get you out of the arena," Ivy said. "It was pretty embarrassing, to be honest."

Gary's expression fell. "Don't exaggerate."

Ivy winked at Ash, and he smiled. "Thanks for the help, guys."

"Don't thank us," Gary said. "Surge's the one who patched you up."

Ash frowned and once more looked at his exposed arms. They were bandaged from his fingertips to his elbows, and he couldn't bend his fingers or wrists. But he sure as hell could feel how sore his hands were from the electrical burns he'd suffered. Someone had stripped him of his armor and clothes, and he wore a green Army T-shirt that exposed the old burns on his upper arms and the back of his neck. A thin blanket covered his legs, and when he wiggled his toes he could feel the right one stretch and ache where more lightning welts had shredded his skin and muscles. Ash sighed and lay back on the bed.

"Guess I should thank him for not actually killing me, then."

"Wouldn't make no sense killin' an ally."

Ash looked up and saw Surge himself leaning in the doorway of the

small medical ward. He stared openly at the face of the man who'd held him by the neck with his bare hand like he was nothing but a plaything. But Surge's words struck him deeper than the phantom ache in his neck.

"Ally?"

Gary nodded. "Check your shirt."

Ash fumbled awkwardly with his bandaged hands and felt down the front of his borrowed shirt. Pinned to the right breast was a small badge that glimmered yellow and gold like the sun itself.

"He called it the Thunder Badge," Ivy said with a grin. "Pinned it on you when you were passed out."

"I don't understand. I lost. I blacked out in the arena."

"Not before you put my Electabuzz in critical and scared the shit stains outta Raichu. If it was a real war, I'd have a knife in my sternum."

Ash could hardly believe what he was hearing. He pushed himself up on his elbows. "I did all that?"

"That and signed your own death warrant."

Ash's good mood sank, and Surge studied him with a grim expression.

"I told you, war ain't about winnin', it's about survivin'. You passed out in a battle zone, left your Pokémon totally defenseless. Maybe you woulda taken me out, but Raichu woulda finished y'off, if not the environmental hazards. You got some balls and a good head for fighting, I'll give you that. But you don't plan ahead, kid, and that's gonna getcha killed for real one of these days. Don't matter what crazy moves you come up with. Dead is dead."

Ash bit his lip. "You make a good point."

"You bet your skinny ass I do." He crossed his arms. "You don't get to remain a Gym Leader my age by running around like a headless chicken."

"Oh c'mon, now you're exaggerating."

"You got struck by lightning," Gary said. "And Pikachu's last attack was this close to frying you by mistake instead of Electabuzz. It was a huge gamble."

"But it worked."

Surge sighed. "Whatever. Point is, I'm a man of my word. No way Team Rocket or someone who wasn't serious woulda pulled the shit you did out there just to talk to me. So I'll hear y'out."

"So you admit you're not a fan of Team Rocket?"

Surge spit into the trashcan near the door. "More like I ain't a fan of anyone who comes into my town with plans to run it on their terms."

"But you said before that Team Rocket wasn't in Vermilion," Gary said.

"Maybe not pounding down the door to your Gym," Ivy said, "but they've been here. You're the one who claimed to know what's going on in his own backyard."

Surge and Ivy locked gazes for a tense moment. She smirked.

"There sure is a lotta construction happening. Care to comment on that?"

"I get the feeling you already got some idea in that pretty little head, so why don't you *enlighten* me?"

"Ivy." Gary put a hand her wrist in warning.

"I used to work for Team Rocket," she said, ignoring Gary. "And I know how they operate. Construction's their bread and butter. It creates jobs and public works, but it also makes for a perfect cover for less humanitarian activities like money laundering and smuggling, not to mention gaining the ignorant public's support. You wanna tell us why Vermilion's building a power plant when I hear the one in Lavender's supposed to be the big supplier?"

Surge laughed. "That explains your moves. You Rockets're like worms. Hard to hold you down for long before you slip away."

"You're not mad?" Ash asked. "When she told us, it was...sort of a shock."

"Why would I be mad about anyone havin' the balls to get the hell outta that cluster fuck? I did the same thing."

"You were Team Rocket?" Gary asked. His hand hovered over Scyther's Pokéball instinctively.

"They weren't Team Rocket back then, and they weren't even a 'they'. When I enlisted for the war, my unit commander turned out to be the man who'd go on to create Team Rocket years later. His first recruits were my unit mates."

Ivy paled. "You know Giovanni D'Argento?"

"*Know* him? I saved his life."

Ash listened with rapt attention as Surge told them his story, how he'd run away from home at seventeen with just a wad of sweaty cash stuffed in his pocket, two Pokémon, and enough self-aggrandizement to sustain him when he ran out of money for food. He'd lied about his age, enlisted in the Army, and got shipped off to Cinnabar for training. As a respected Gym Leader, Blaine was a General in the ranks and leader of Surge's entire division, while Giovanni, just a few years Surge's senior, was Surge's commanding officer in their fifteen-man unit. They grew close in the war effort, as soldiers are wont to do, and Surge saved Giovanni's life during the naval bombings in Cinnabar with his Electric Pokémon.

"The Johtoans had this huge pod of Tentacruel that fucked with our Water Strike Division," Surge explained. "So you can imagine why I got sent to the front lines, and how I thought that was my big break, really show 'em what I could do.

"I got lucky. Raichu was still a Pikachu back then, but I had a Jolteon I'd raised up from an Eevee, too. Thing about Electric types is they got breadth. There ain't no physical restrictions on them, not like Fighters who gotta connect their punches. Factor in the ocean and, well, you can imagine how things went for me.

"Long story short, my unit went down in history that day. I even earned my nickname, the Red Flash, 'cause my lightning left nothin' but blood behind." Surge jingled his dog tags, where his unit number, date of birth, name, and nickname had been inscribed. "Wars, they don't happen in a day 'n end overnight. They drag on. We had some good times, and we had some bad. The fighting was never really over. But like I said, war bonds people together like nothin' else. Our unit was one of the best, and Giovanni knew it. I remember the night he pitched the idea of a group strong enough to keep shit like this from happenin' ever again. Said we were strong enough to make people listen, to make 'em stop fighting. And we believed him."

"So you were a founding member of Team Rocket?" Ivy asked.

"If you wanna look at it like that, then sure. Back then it was Giovanni and me, of course, and there was also Ariana, Archer, Petrel, and Proton. We were the heart of the unit. The so-called 'founders'."

"Ariana," Ivy said. "I knew her. She was an Admin back in Blackthorn City."

Surge grunted. "They all stayed on with Giovanni. Team Rocket's not really a group you quit."

"So how'd you get out?" Gary asked.

"Same way she did, no doubt. I escaped. Back then, though, it wasn't so hard. Giovanni didn't have the scope he's got now."

Ash shook his head. "But if you were so close, why leave? What changed?"

Surge traced the ugly scar that bisected his face. "Let's just say someone kicked some sense into me."

Ivy and Gary picked up his meaning easily.

"Ever since I got to Kanto, I've heard a lot of people talking about Blaine and how great he is," Ivy said. "Does he have a golden dick or something? I mean, c'mon."

"Can't say about that," Surge said, "but outside the Elite Four, Blaine's the strongest trainer in Kanto. And maybe more than the Elite Four, he's a household name. Respected. He's the hero of the Great War, and everyone wanted to fight for him. The mainland was pretty connected throughout the war, partly outta necessity, but also for convenience. It made sense for everyone to work together.

"Blaine was the one who decided to break away from the mainland politics and run his shit his way. A little ironic, when you think about how he was a rallying point during the fighting. Cinnabar's a hundred percent self-sufficient today, and nobody can fuck with 'em. You might say he started the isolationist trend you see here. Problem is, not a lotta people're cut out to run and maintain huge settlements."

"So you used to be with Team Rocket back when it wasn't Team Rocket," Ash said, "and now you're the Gym Leader here. What're you doing now? Why haven't you stood up to Team Rocket?"

Surge looked between the trio and studied them a moment. "Y'ever heard the saying 'fools rush in'? I ain't no fool. You asked about the power plant that's goin' up by the harbor." He nodded to Ivy. "That ain't Team Rocket, it's all me. Like I said, Team Rocket doesn't operate here. At least, not in the open and not through the government. Giovanni knows I kill first 'n ask questions later. Made that clear enough when I held a public electrocution for the slimeballs he sent here to bribe the mayor."

Ash swallowed at the implications. His leg flared in pain as he remembered the electric burn that had torn it apart. Surge seemed to notice his guests' discomfort and scowled.

"You don't fuck around with these bastards," Surge said. "Sooner you kids learn they only speak violence, the longer you'll stay alive. This is *my* city. I ain't about to hand it over without a fight. And I know Giovanni. He's takin' his time, poisoning his way to the top. By the time anyone gets the balls to fight back, it's too late. You gotta snuff 'em when they're still green."

Ivy seemed less put off by Surge's gruesome confession than her two companions. "And that's why no one's risen up in arms. Team Rocket's not doing anything ostensibly bad or even illegal, and the cities have enough to deal with day to day."

"Exactly. But I know what's comin', so I got no tolerance for the games Team Rocket likes to play. They're not gettin' Vermilion."

Gary took a steadying breath. "So if the power plant is your project, then why build it at all? Vermilion's got plenty of power from what I can see."

"You kids been livin' under a rock? The Plant in Lavender's been having blackouts, and they keep gettin' longer. We got enough natural gas and tamed Electrode to keep us going, but you can't expect me to pass up a chance to rake in some more cash flow. The Lavender Plant's goin' under soon at this rate. Why d'you think everyone's getting the fuck outta dodge? Saffron closed its gates after so many Lavenderites started migrating. That town's dying, and they got no Gym Leader to bail 'em out."

Ash could have spit. "Then you should be *helping* them, not profiting from their problems!"

Surge chuckled. "Kid, you're alright, but you're duller than a bag of hammers when it comes to politics. It's every city for themselves, and I

ain't about to leave Vermilion hangin' to play the Good Samaritan."

"Wait a minute," Gary said. "You said people have been fleeing Lavender? Are you sure it's just because the Power Plant's going under?"

"It's the life's blood of the town. I wouldn't stick around just to lose everything, either."

"On our way here, we ran into a family heading west out of Lavender."

Gary went on to tell Surge about the dead travelers, the feasting Primeape and Mankey, and the little boy's ghastly state.

"Dunno anything about a disease," Surge said.

Ivy rubbed her temples. "Well, listen. Are you gonna help us with Team Rocket or not? That's why we came here. If Chimera takes off on a global scale, it won't matter how many Grunts you publicly execute."

"I said I'd hear you out, and only because you," he looked pointedly at Ash, "showed some shred of potential. I never said I'd go along with your insanity."

Ash sat up fully in bed and slipped off the side. He had to limp on his good leg as he hobbled toward Surge.

"You know what I hate about you Gym Leaders?" he spat. "You all think the world revolves around you. You're living in your little bubbles, and fuck everyone else, right?"

"Ash—" Gary reached for his arm, but Ash shot shot him a venomous glare that stayed his hand.

"I'm not finished," he said, warning in his tone.

Gary backed off, a little stunned.

Ash returned his glare to Surge, who did his best to stand up straight and look at Ash over his nose.

"So I'm some kid who doesn't know shit about what it's like to be in a war. Yeah, you got me there. But I know a little of what it means to fight, to lose people I care about, and to suffer."

Gary's gaze fell to Ash's exposed arms, where the burn-healed skin shone under the room's fluorescent lighting.

"I've been to three Gyms now, and I see the same goddamned problems over and over and over. You think I'm the dumb one? *You're* the one givin' everyone the finger when you coulda had two powerful allies in Pewter and Cerulean. I mean, wake the fuck up, Surge."

Surge bared his teeth in a snarl. "You watch your tongue with me, boy, or I'll snap your neck for real."

"You couldn't even do it for fake! I don't care how much you think you know about Team Rocket or how many battle scars you've got. The fact is I walked in here and showed you what one man can do when he puts his mind to it. What d'you think all of Team Rocket could do if they put their minds to taking over Vermilion, huh? 'Cause that's what they're gonna do when that Chimera Project gets finished, if it isn't already. I've seen what it can do to Pokémon. It's an abomination, and it nearly wiped out Pallet Town. You said you've done a lot for this country, and I don't doubt it. But what the hell're you doing for it now?"

Surge and Ash faced off, and in the commotion Ash's leg had started bleeding again. Blood soaked through his bandages and dripped onto the concrete floor. Ivy and Gary dared not interrupt as they waited, tense, for whatever would happen next.

"You're bleedin' on my floor," Surge said softly. "Clean yourself up, then get the hell outta my Gym."

He pushed off the wall and left the room with an air of dismissal that Ash didn't dare argue with. All he could do was glower after the man's retreating back as he returned to the main part of the Gym. Ash fumbled with the Thunder Badge pinned to his shirt and struggled to rip it off. It took him a few awkward tries, but he pried it free and threw it on the ground, where it clattered across the floor.

"Ash," Ivy said.

"What good is that without his support? It's nothing but a goddamned trophy to remind me that I didn't accomplish anything here."

"That's not true! When we got here, he was ready to kick us out, and you convinced him to give you a chance. That Thunder Badge is proof that he acknowledged you, and that counts for something."

"It's not good enough. We needed Surge's help, and I didn't get it." He closed his eyes and took a shuddering breath. "What am I gonna tell Brock and Misty? My mom, when she wakes up?"

Gary had remained silent the entire time, but now he retrieved the extra dressings from the bed and kneeled down to re-bind Ash's bleeding leg. "We'll figure that out later. For now, let's do as he asked and get out of here."

Ash set his jaw. His red eyes lingered on the trail of blood he'd left on the concrete, congealing. "The sooner the better."

9. Lavender Town, Part 1

Triumvirate, chapter 9: Lavender Town, Part 1
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

The trio spent the next several days resting at the Pokémon Center and planning their next move. Ash had been quieter than usual after they got the boot from Surge no matter what Ivy said or did to try to lighten his mood. Gary didn't even try, more focused on where they would go from here.

"I was thinking Celadon on our way here, but after what Surge told us about the Power Plant, I wanna check out Lavender next," he said.

"I get that, but they don't have a Gym," Ivy said. "We have to remember the mission here."

"All the same, it's suspicious enough to check out. Team Rocket might be involved somehow, and regardless, I can't stop thinking about that little boy we saw on Route Five."

They both looked to Ash, but he was staring out the window of their rented room. His wounds had healed, and hardly any trace of the welts on his hands and forearms remained. Whatever Surge had given him had done its job well.

"Ash?" Ivy asked. "What do you think?"

Pikachu was curled up next to him and napping. The yellow rodent had been sleeping a lot more than usual ever since its high-energy battle with Surge.

"Lavender, I guess. It's not like anyone else's gonna help them, and there's no guarantee any of the other Gym Leaders'll wanna help us. Let's stick to what we know we can accomplish."

Ivy crossed her arms. "Listen, Ash, I know you're down about what happened with Surge, but—"

"I'm fine," he interrupted. "I'm just saying maybe we were too naïve thinking we could just come in here and convince him to help us. And for that matter, there's no reason any of the other Gym Leaders should just drop everything to help us, either."

"That's not what I meant. Surge's obviously on the same page as us,

but he doesn't think we can do much. As long as we know he's on the right side, though, that can be enough for now."

"You sure about that?" Gary asked. "What if in the end, we can't get all the Gym Leaders on board? Did you think about what would happen then?"

"Okay, stop, I know you think I didn't plan any of this out, so just do me a favor and shut up about it. All I'm saying is one Gym Leader is just *one* Gym Leader. There are seven others, two of whom already agreed to help. Maybe some of them just need a little extra incentive or something, I dunno. But I do know I'm not giving up either way."

"I didn't say we should give up, just that maybe Ash has a point."

Ivy rubbed her temples in frustration. "Okay, enough, both of you. You're just sulking because this didn't go like we planned. Big fucking deal. We'll figure out a way to deal with it, even if we can't think of what to do right this second."

"Gary's right," Ash said softly. "You really didn't plan this at all, did you?"

Ivy shot him a nasty look. "You, can it. I'm not gonna smack you 'cause I know that's your bruised ego talking, but cut the pity party already. And you," she turned to Gary. "It looks like we're going to Lavender first, which is fine with me. So let's just drop the Gym talks for now."

The idea of roughing it in the wilderness again so soon was not appealing to Ivy, but they had no other way to travel at the moment, and they couldn't stay in Vermilion forever. The only comfort was that they had a number of strong Pokémon with them to keep them safe. With plans to set off later that morning, the trio took the last showers they would enjoy for the foreseeable future, packed up their few belongings, and split up in the Pokémon Center's lobby to replenish some of their supplies.

"We'll have to pack light. We don't exactly have much money left," Gary said. "We still have some leftovers from the stuff Misty got us, but we'll have to hunt for our food probably by the time we get to Route Twelve." He paused and thought for a moment. "A fishing rod would be a good piece of equipment to have."

Ivy rolled her eyes. "Didn't you *just* say we need to pack light like the poor people we are? Who the hell's gonna pay for a fishing rod?"

Gary's expression fell and his eye twitched. "I was just saying in general, it'd be a good thing to have since Route Twelve runs along the coast. It's not like I'm suggesting we buy one."

"Then what's the point of bringing it up?"

Ash ignored them as they bickered and sank down into one of the leather couches in the lobby, counting the minutes before they could leave.

While Ivy was busy arguing with Gary, neither of them noticed the person who arrived in the Pokémon Center and made a beeline for Ash.

"Ash," the man said. "Hey, sorry to bother you, but I couldn't just let ya leave without a word."

Ash looked up from the couch to find Bernie, Surge's electrical engineer, standing next to the sofa holding his hardhat in both hands. Bernie's brown hair was short and matted from the hardhat's constant weight, and his five o'clock shadow gave him a haggard appearance. Before Ash could get a word in edgewise, Bernie held out the Thunder Badge for him to take.

"You left this at the Gym."

Ash glanced briefly at the glimmering stone. "It's not mine to take."

"Sure, it is. Listen, I know things didn't go as you wanted them to with the Lieutenant and all. Well, not that I'm surprised. He's got a bit of a hard head. But I gotta tell ya, in all my years working with him, I've never seen him acknowledge anyone the way he did for you. He's a great man, a leader, but that's all I've ever really seen him be to his subordinates. Even Sandra, who's been with him since he became Gym Leader, never got the reaction outta him that you did the other day. It was somethin', I'll tell ya."

Ivy and Gary stopped their squabbling long enough to recognize Bernie and catch the tail end of his explanation. They joined Ash and him at the sofas.

Ash shook his head. "That's nice and all, but it doesn't help me."

Bernie sighed dejectedly. "Then maybe this will. The Lieutenant received an SOS from the Lavender Police Department a little bit ago, just before you got here, actually. They were requestin' assistance for

the Power Plant, of course, since the Lieutenant's an Electric Pokémon master. Now, we already knew about the troubles with the Power Plant. What caught my interest, though, was how they mentioned the Radio Tower. It's a new project, maybe you heard of it, but it was put on hold for a long time with all the Power Plant issues.

"Anyway, the SOS said some newcomers had shown up from outta town to get the project going again. It's been slow going, I guess, but I got the impression the Radio Tower's a go despite the Power Plant troubles. Dunno how they're gonna swing that, but after what you all said about that family you met on Route Five, it got me thinkin'."

Ivy narrowed her eyes. "Newcomers from out of town, huh? I just got a bad taste in my mouth."

"Anyway, the Lieutenant's already decided not to send any help. We may look like a big town, but the reality's we don't have a whole lotta professional trainers. People come here to work the land in some way, and families don't tend to leave. So we don't have much to spare for this kinda request."

"That's a pretty pathetic excuse," Ash said.

"It's outta my hands, unfortunately, til the Lieutenant changes his mind."

"You say that like you think he will," Gary said. "Will he?"

"I've known the Lieutenant a long time, and when he sets his mind to something, he usually stays the course like a bull in a china shop, don't matter what ends up collateral. But he's also a smart man, a military man, and he knows the smell of shit when it gets dumped at his front door. I can't promise anything, but we've been talkin' about Team Rocket for a while now. We're just not at the point where we're ready to take a more active role."

"Then when *will* you be ready?" Ivy said. "Sorry to rip into the messenger, but doesn't Surge get that remaining idle is almost as bad as actively helping Team Rocket? C'mon, you don't really think Vermilion can just ignore what's happening."

"I don't think so, no. But... Well, the Lieutenant's a hard man to sway."

"Either way, it looks like we can't do much sticking around here," Gary said. "We're heading to Lavender next. Maybe we can check out whatever's going on."

Bernie nodded. "That'd be a big help, thanks. I only wish I could do more."

Bernie wished them well on their journey, and when Ash still refused to accept the Thunder Badge, he promised to hold onto it until Ash changed his mind.

"Not until Surge changes his mind first," he grumbled as they headed east out of town.

"Don't hold your breath on that," Gary said as he examined the small map of Kanto he brought with him.

"So, how do we get to Lavender from here?" Ivy asked as they neared the outskirts of town.

It was a beautiful day, blue skies and fluffy, white clouds. The ocean breeze was a comfort despite the setback they'd encountered here, and Ivy sucked in a long, deep breath. Ash trudged along behind Gary and her with Pikachu on his shoulder and his hands in his pockets.

"We have to head onto Route Eleven, which is just a few miles. The real trek'll be hiking north up Route Twelve. It's on the coast and exposed to the elements."

Once they were out of Vermilion and the streets turned to dirt then to mere animal paths, the trio released some of their Pokémon to keep watch for them. Gary loosed Scyther and Growlithe to scout ahead and Eevee to give it some time to run around a bit. Ivy let out Houndour, as per her usual, and also Wigglytuff. The pink rabbit was immediately taken with Gary's Eevee, having never met the small feline before, and couldn't decide between exploring the unfamiliar environment and pestering Eevee to satisfy its curiosity.

"Interesting choice," Gary said.

"I figure she's a good balance with the cold shadow following us."

Ash hung back with Pikachu and Ivysaur. "I heard that."

Ivy grinned at him over her shoulder. "Good!"

They passed by Diglett's Cave, and Ash stopped near the entrance to peer into the inky darkness. Ivy and Gary waited for him up ahead.

"At least we don't have to go through that thing," Gary said. "Dugtrio

are some of the worst Pokémon to encounter in the wild. They attack from underground, so they're almost impossible to kill."

There were signs cautioning would-be spelunkers and explorers against entering the dark cave, though Ivy needed no such discouragement to steer clear. Ash stared past the entrance, his expression unreadable.

"He's taking this pretty hard," Gary said.

Ivy studied Ash's profile as he continued to gaze deep into the darkness. "Maybe. Or maybe it's something else."

Before Gary could say anything to that, Ash turned toward them and nodded.

"Sorry, just spacing. Let's keep going."

They spent the rest of the day hiking through the tall grasses and foothills of Route Eleven. The wild Pokémon largely kept out of sight, though Growlithe and Houndour had spotted an Ekans in the bushes and burned the thing to a crisp before tearing it in two in a game of tug-of-war. Wigglytuff disturbed a small flock of Spearow in its non-stop exploration of the Route, and reacting on instinct, the pink rabbit inflated itself to nearly five times its normal size. The shock cowed the Spearow long enough for Ash to have Ivysaur trap two of them with Vine Whip and snap their little necks.

"Dinner's served," he said with barely contained smugness.

They camped in the foothills, deciding to wait to approach the coast on Route Twelve until the next day. Munchlax and Aerodactyl, as usual, went to town on any food they could find once released from their Pokéballs.

"Wow," Ivy commented. "They really are growing. I feel like they get bigger every time I see them."

Ash, who'd lightened up a little bit during the all-day hike and his small victory over the Spearow, said, "Huh, I didn't notice. But if you wanna talk big, that Wigglytuff is pretty nuts. How does that even work, like, with the bones and stuff?"

They both looked at Gary as he chewed on a drumstick. "Hey, don't look at me. It's not like I know everything."

That got a smile out of Ash, and Ivy chuckled.

"What?" Gary demanded.

"Oh, nothing." Ivy pulled out her Pokédex and scanned Wigglytuff, who was munching on some grass just a few feet away from her. She scrolled through the information Oak had uploaded on the pink rabbit. "What can Wigglytuff even do? Like, moves-wise? I feel like I should start training her up if she's gonna stick around."

"Wigglytuff's a Normal-type," Gary said. "So it can use moves like Mega Kick, the way it did when we were fighting those Mankey and Primeape. Also things like Double Slap or Mega Punch, those straightforward physical attacks. But you can also train them to learn non-Normal-type moves, like Rollout. Normal-type Pokémon are some of the most versatile."

Ash glanced at where Munchlax was happily stuffing its face with anything edible within reach. "Like Munchlax, once he evolves."

Ivy threw up her hands before they could launch into this tired debate for the umpteenth time. "So, back to Wigglytuff. She should be pretty strong since she Moonstone evolved, right?"

Gary narrowed his eyes at Ash, but dropped the fledgling argument in favor of the conversation. "Yeah, I would think so. You'll just have to find a good rhythm with Wigglytuff. It'll be harder for you since Normal and Dark are pretty much polar opposites on the type spectrum."

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence," she grumbled.

Wigglytuff stood up on its hind legs like a deer in the headlights and stared at Ivy with wide eyes.

"What?" Ivy said, frowning at Wigglytuff. "Don't tell me you don't think I can do it, either."

"I didn't say I don't think you can do it," Gary said. "Just that it'll be a challenge."

Ivy got up abruptly and startled Wigglytuff. "Oh, yeah? Well, we better get started, then. Wigglytuff, use Rollout on Gary." She pointed at Gary to further emphasize the command.

Wigglytuff just stared up at her and continued to munch on the grass

it had been eating. Gary's lips curled in a smirk.

"Idiot. You have to teach it how to do that first. It can't just magically know what you mean."

"Oh please, I know that already. I just wanted to see if she'd at least tackle you."

Gary's smirk faded. "Why the hell would you wanna see that?"

"C'mon, Wigglytuff. Let's work on teaching you Rollout."

Ivy picked up Wigglytuff and walked out of the camp so she wouldn't disturb anyone.

"Ivy, hey!" Gary called after her. "Goddamn pesky woman."

Ash watched the entire exchange in silence. "Dude, you're in big trouble."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

Ash shrugged. "Whatever."

"Not 'whatever', tell me what you meant by that. Ash!"

About ten days into their journey, the trio was about ready to call it quits and just give up. The coastal winds from the east were relentless and freezing, especially at night. While the trio had been spared the threat of rain so far, the bone-chilling wind cut deep and gave them little repose. Route Twelve was a fairly flat throughway stretching from Lavender in the north all the way to the southeastern coast. It technically followed the coastline the entire way, but the trio did their best to travel as far inland as possible without straying too far from the path. The woods grew thicker the farther north they traveled, and getting lost was an all-too real possibility should they wander too far off-track.

Along the way, they made a dedicated effort to start altering their battling styles to better suit the guerilla warfare style Surge had employed against Ash in their Gym match. It was easier said than done.

"Water Gun!" Gary shouted.

"Whirlwind!" Ash's Butterfree blew Golduck's Water Gun completely

off course, where Pikachu was waiting with a Thundershock.

"Nidoking!"

Nidoking cut in front of Golduck and took the electric shock like it was nothing more than annoying static.

"Punch it!" Gary ordered.

Nidoking pulled back its fist and prepared to send Pikachu flying, but it ended up colliding with an impenetrable, pink wall.

"Smack it down, Wigglytuff!"

Ivy's enlarged Wigglytuff pushed back on Nidoking's fist with all its might and knocked the armored rodent over on its back. No sooner had Wigglytuff quickly deflated and rolled off of Nidoking than something swooped down from the sky and snatched it up. Aerodactyl, now large enough to fly on its own, soared through the air with Wigglytuff secured firmly in its talons.

"Damnit!" Ivy shouted, throwing another Pokéball. "Ground him, Batty!"

Golbat leaped into the air in a flash of light and flew after Aerodactyl. Bigger and older, Golbat easily caught up to Aerodactyl in mid-air and slammed into its side with a Wing Attack. Ivy ran after them and jumped with all her might to catch her falling Wigglytuff when Aerodactyl dropped it. She tumbled into the sand and got the wind knocked out of her, but relief was nowhere in sight when Ash's Wartortle sprayed her with a powerful jet of water that caught her in the side and sent her rolling into the brush.

"Aerodactyl!" Gary shouted. "Take it out with Ancient Power!"

Aerodactyl squawked and its scales began to glow orange and rise up off its flesh like goosebumps. It flapped frantically to put some distance between Golbat and itself, then swooped around for a head-on collision that rammed Golbat in the belly and sent them both toppling out of the air.

Nidoking roared all of a sudden when Ash turned Wartortle on it. Gary swore and ran to help his largest Pokémon.

"Eyes open, Gary!" he called as Wartortle hit Nidoking with a Water Gun in the gut.

"Eyes open, Ash!"

Ivy ran up behind him and smacked him in the back with a piece of driftwood, and he went down. Gary put up his hands to stay Nidoking and Wartortle.

"Okay, time! Goddamn."

"Ivy, what the hell, man?" Ash said from his place on the beach. He rubbed his sore back where she'd hit him.

"Sorry," she said, dropping the driftwood. "We said we wanted to simulate the real thing."

"Well, you coulda hit me with something softer, you know. It's the motions that count."

She crossed her arms. "Says the guy who ordered Wartortle to Water Gun me. I'm soaked!"

Gary ran a hand through his hair. "Okay, so we learned we're not that great at this. We just have to keep practicing."

"It's not even that we're not great at it so much as we have to learn to split our attention," Ivy said. "Concentrating on like fifteen things at once is what gets people killed."

"Tell me about it," Ash grumbled. Pikachu pawed at his side in concern, and he scratched the little rodent behind the ears.

"I better go get Aerodactyl. I think I saw him and Batty crash somewhere in the woods," Gary said.

They kept their battles to a minimum, wanting to conserve the Pokémon's strength in case of emergency. But they made progress, slow as it was, on an individual basis. Aerodactyl was flying and using more advanced techniques than biting and scratching, and Wigglytuff was starting to listen to Ivy's commands more and more, though some days were better than others. The weather wasn't conducive to training, either. Their thirteenth day of travel was so bad with high-speed winds and frothing waves that they had to sit and wait it out before daring to continue. They spent about eleven straight hours huddled together with their backs to the wind, unable even to keep a fire going. Ash counted every agonizing second.

And then suddenly, as though by divine decree, on the fifteenth day of

near-constant shivering and dwindling energy to do more than huddle for warmth, the winds broke and the sea calmed. Ivy could not believe the change and voiced as much.

"We must be getting close to Silence Bridge," Gary said as he looked at the map. "It's the only way to cross the bay to Lavender. The whole area's protected by underwater mountains that pretty much nullify the tides. Makes it a great fishing spot, or so I've heard."

"Does that mean we're almost to Lavender?" Ash said.

"Looks like another day of hiking and we'll probably reach it."

"Thank god."

They camped that night on the beach since there was hardly any wind and the water's surface was as smooth as glass. Tributaries emptied into the bay from the larger rivers that ran through Cerulean farther west, and Ivy announced her intention to get a bath in. Gary and Ash waited until she was finished before rinsing themselves.

With Umbreon keeping watch as she scrubbed the dirt and grime from her skin and hair as best she could, Ivy bathed quickly. Umbreon made a low growling sound as she was toweling off and pulling her pants back on, and Ivy looked up to see Ash standing just a short ways away.

"S-Sorry, didn't mean to sneak up on you!" he stammered. "I just needed to know if you wanted Pidgey or Rattata tonight. Scyther came back with both, so we got our pick."

Ivy shrugged and maintained her bare back to him while she towel dried her long hair. "Um, Pidgey, I guess. I feel like we've had way too much Rattata lately."

When Ash didn't leave right away, she spared him a glance over her shoulder. "Something wrong?"

He was staring at her back, but there was no lascivious glint in his eyes or even a mild show of interest. There was only a deep-seated emptiness that gave her a chill.

"Ash?"

He blinked and averted his gaze. "Sorry, I wasn't staring or anything like that. Just... Whatever, I'm sorry."

He started to walk away and Ivy quickly pulled on a tank top before jogging after him. "Hey, wait up. What's wrong?"

Ash stopped but didn't look back at her. "Your scars," he said softly. "There's a lot."

She hugged herself around her middle, where she could feel scars from old knife wounds, old beatings both her fault and the fault of others. Large and small, clean and ugly, they marked her like a map of the past.

"I was sloppy as a kid," she said. "Made a lotta dumb mistakes that I paid for."

His shoulders were tense as he listened, and she wondered if he really knew what she meant. If he could imagine the life she'd lived. She hoped not.

"How do you do it? How do you live with them?"

She let her gaze fall to his hands, which had healed almost perfectly and looked completely normal in the cover of night.

She put a hand on his shoulder, but she didn't smile. "By remembering that they're proof that I survived, not evidence that I suffered."

She let her hand fall and walked past him back toward the camp with Umbreon in tow. Ash watched her go, clenching his fists so hard they hurt.

Silence Bridge was home to a community of fishing families that built their homes directly on the water on stilts and got around by boat and boardwalk. Gary expected to find them all outside practicing their trade, but there wasn't a soul out of doors. Empty, wooden boats were moored to the docks, floating gently on the still water. The houses themselves were hand-built of wood and mud to keep the draft out and decorated with netting, buoys, and other fishing paraphernalia. Lavender Town was a stone's throw away from Silence Bridge.

"Okay, this is creepy," Ash said. "Where is everyone?"

"The boats are all here, so they can't all be out of town," Ivy said.

Magikarp floated just below the water's surface, fat and lazy and in search of food. They were the only signs of life around. Gary motioned

for Golduck to slip into the water and stay alert. He approached the nearest house and knocked on the door.

"Is anyone home?" he asked.

There was no response, not even a shuffling of feet to indicate that anyone was hiding inside. Ivy followed his lead and went to the next house over. Still no answer. Between the three of them, they tried six of the seven dwellings to no avail.

"Hey, someone's in the window over there," Ivy said, pointing to the seventh and final house.

"Are you sure? I didn't see anything," Gary said.

"They were looking through the curtains. C'mon, I know what I saw."

Ash was closest, so he knocked on the door. "Hello? Anyone in there?"

There was no answer, but they could hear a muffled noise from the other side of the door that sounded a bit like thumping.

"If you don't open up, we're busting down the door," Ivy said. "I'll give you to the count of three. One... Two... Th—"

The door swung open then and revealed a shriveled old man in a salt-stained jerkin and a wooden cane. He was barefoot and clutched a long, scraggly beard with bony fingers. His shifty eyes peered between the trio.

"W-Whaddaya want? Scram!"

Gary caught the door before he could slam it in their faces. "It's okay, old man. We're not here to rob you. We just wanna know where everybody is."

The old man looked around behind them and sucked up some drool that had escaped the corners of his mouth. "Where?"

"Yeah, *where*," Ivy repeated. "This place looks like a ghost town."

The old man began to shake. "Oh no, oh no! They're all gone! Where'd they get to?"

"Uh, I feel like we're not gonna get anywhere with him," Ash said.

The old man started to tug at his hair and retreated into his house.

Gary got a brief look inside and wished he hadn't. The walls were stacked to the ceiling with all manner of cleansing and spiritual materials. Talismans, dream catchers, incense, bone chimes, and other useless junk only the especially superstitious ever indulged in. A smell wafted from somewhere inside that made Gary's eyes water.

"Oh, god." Ivy covered her nose. "I think something died in there."

The old man went into a panic and struggled with the door. "Get away! Be gone, I banish you!"

Ash pinched his finger in the hinge and swore. The old man slammed the door on them suddenly, and the trio was once more stranded outside.

"Crazy old man," Ash grumbled. "What was his deal, anyway?"

"No idea," Gary said. "But I think we better head to Lavender and find out if anyone knows what's going on."

It was midday with few clouds in the sky, but as they hiked farther north, mist rolled in from the bay and settled at their feet and crept up to mid-thigh. The air was noticeably more humid, as well, and the closer they got to Lavender, the duller the sunlight became until it was more of a glow than a shine.

"Dop bop beep bop, dop bop beep bop." Ash sang a minor key ditty as they went, and Ivy shot him a look.

"Cut that out."

"Oooh, you scared, Ivy?"

"No, but you'll be if you keep that up." She brandished a fist at him.

Golduck and Pikachu were out of their Pokéballs and keeping a lookout. Silence Bridge eventually ended on a sandbar that turned into a grassy path as the trio put the bay behind them. But even an hour's worth of trekking along the path didn't rid them of the fog that permeated the area and dumped into Lavender Town. The stone archway that marked the entrance to Lavender joined together two ancient, crumbling walls that had once surrounded the city before the Johto air raids leveled most of it.

When they got into the town itself, there was hardly a soul to be seen. Those that were out and about—a young woman, an old couple, a

man with a cane—all stopped walking and stared openly at the strangers in their midst. Ivy released Umbreon from her Pokéball, and the black feline silently fell into step next to her.

"Do you guys feel that?" she said.

"Feel what?"

She shook her head. "I dunno, just this feeling I get. Like I'm cold, but the air's really warm. I can't explain it."

Ash and Gary exchanged a look, unsure how to respond to that.

Lavender Town was as much a small town as Vermilion was a sprawling city. With a population of barely two thousand and the town proper stretching only about a mile from one end to the other, it had a compact, almost claustrophobic feel to it. The dwellings and public buildings were all new looking, having been rebuilt after the war, and they were made with brownstone mined from Rock Tunnel to the north. Near Rock Tunnel stood the Power Plant, whose architectural layout contrasted starkly with the traditional Lavender style. A seven-story tower in the northeast part of town was the most recognizable landmark—the Kanto Radio Tower.

"I wanna check out the Radio Tower, guys," Gary said. "If Team Rocket really is behind whatever's going on here, that's where they'll be."

"What about the Pokémon Center?" Ash asked.

"Just humor me, okay? I wanna know what we're dealing with before we get too comfortable."

Ivy followed the boys with Umbreon and shivered a little. "Somehow, I doubt we'll be getting comfortable here at all."

On their way to the Radio Tower, they passed by a narrow street that ended at the entrance to a three story mansion. It was the only building that appeared to be made of wood with a wrap-around porch and conical towers with narrow windows. There was a wide garden that spread around it in all directions, but the mist obscured anything that might be growing in it. Gary instantly looked away the moment he saw it, a bad taste souring his tongue. Ivy was quick to tail him past it, too, but Ash slowed down to get a good look. Pikachu squeaked on his shoulder and looked after Ivy and Gary as they continued on.

"What is that?" he wondered aloud.

He took a few steps toward it without thinking, and Pikachu began to spark, startling him.

"Hey, Ash, c'mon!" Ivy called back at him.

"Huh? Oh, sorry, I'm coming."

He took one last look at the sprawling mansion, but ignored the tugging sensation at his feet that beckoned him closer, instead continuing on after the others.

Given Lavender's rather small, compact size, it didn't take more than fifteen minutes to reach the eastern edge of town and the Radio Tower that occupied it. Golduck sat crouched next to Gary when they stopped in front of the tall structure and shifted its large, black eyes, chasing the amorphous mist as it ebbed and flowed all around them.

Gary tried the door and, finding it unlocked, went inside. The lobby was as normal as could be expected with polished, tile floors, a reception desk, and some nondescript couches for visitors to wait comfortably.

"Uh, where is everybody?" Ash said as they wandered inside.

The receptionist's desk was empty and neatly kempt. A door to the right of it read 'Stairs', but when Ivy tried it, it was locked from the other side. Gary investigated the front desk, but the filing cabinet next to the swivel chair was locked, too. There was nothing but a ledger on the desk itself with visitor names and dates. He scanned the list, but there was no one who jumped out at him.

"What are you doing here?"

The trio looked up from their snooping and spotted a woman in her thirties at the front door. She wore a blue uniform and matching cap, and her glossy, black hair was tied back in a low ponytail at the base of her neck. A Growlithe and a large Parasect flanked her, quivering and ready to strike on command.

Gary put out a hand to stay Golduck from attacking prematurely. "We're not here to cause trouble."

"Then what're you doing snooping around in here?"

"Whoa, hey," Ash said. "Look, we came here from Vermilion 'cause we heard rumors that there was something weird going on here with the Radio Tower, and we just wanted to check it out. No big deal."

The woman, an officer or government worker of some sort, frowned. "Vermilion? Then you're not with Team Rocket?"

"Hell no," Ivy said. "We're here because we thought they were involved in whatever problems are happening here. You know anything about that?"

The woman hesitated and looked between the trio. "Prove you're not with Team Rocket. I can't just trust a group of strangers. This is a small town."

Ivy and Gary were quick to show the woman their Gym Badges.

"We're not with Team Rocket," Gary reiterated. "These're proof from the Pewter and Cerulean Gym Leaders. They wouldn't back Team Rocket."

The woman thought about that a moment before signaling to her Pokémon to stand down. "Good enough for now. Listen, this is gonna sound strange, but you need to come with me and fast."

She didn't wait for them and headed outside. The door swung closed behind her and sent a cloud of mist rolling inside. Ash was already taking off after her before Gary could get a word in.

"We're just gonna trust her?" Ivy said.

"Right now, it doesn't look like we can do much else," Gary said.

The woman led them at a loping jog to the courthouse in the town center. The brownstone structure was the oldest looking building in town, with weathered cracks in the wooden stairs and grease-stained windows that hadn't been washed in months. An old, brass bell sat motionless in the steeple. Inside, the place was spacious and cleared out to make room for people.

A lot of people.

Most were lying in bedrolls while a few bustled about helping the bedridden. Gary followed the officer as she made her way through the crowd with her Pokémon, and no one paid her much mind. People were in various states of consciousness. The ones lying down were

pale, gaunt, and sweaty with sickness. Their eyes were closed and ringed with purple splotches. Men, women, and children; young and old; it didn't matter. The few able-bodied people were busy carrying buckets of water with clean towels to keep the infirm hydrated and comfortable, but there was no sign of any actual medical treatment going on. Gary lifted a hand to cover his nose and mouth.

Umbreon hissed behind him. The black feline was crouched with its hackles raised and yellow eyes narrowed to slits. Ivy kneeled down to pick it up.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Umbreon bared its teeth and swished its tail.

"Ivy, c'mon," Gary said.

The sick people moaned softly in their fever sleep as the trio passed. When the officer led them to a back room and closed the door, Gary rubbed his arms for warmth. The door was nothing sturdy, but it was a barrier between him and the infirm. Golduck remained crouched at his side, silent.

"If you were looking for problems, you came to the right place," the officer said. "I'm with the Lavender Police Department—what's left of it, at least." She held out her hand for each of the trio to shake. "Jenny."

They introduced themselves, and Ash asked about the sick people in the other room. "What's wrong with them?"

Jenny shook her head. "That's just it. The doctors couldn't figure it out. We even had a specialist called in from Saffron, and he couldn't figure it out, either. The disease got him in the end, too. It started several months ago. At first, people were just complaining about feeling weak and tired, and the local nurses thought it was anemia. But then the depression started hitting, and people stayed indoors, stopped going to work. That was around the same time the Power Plant began acting up. So many people got sick that our local clinic couldn't house them all, so the overflow ended up here."

"Listen, Jenny," Ivy said. "I know you don't know us, and we don't know you. But we just came from Vermilion Gym, and they said something about getting an SOS from Lavender. That's why we decided to come up here, see if there was anything we could do to help since they're not doing anything."

Jenny rubbed her temples. "I figured it was a long shot. I know Lt. Surge has a lot on his plate with Vermilion and it's not fair to ask him to thin his resources for us, but I had to try."

"Have you contacted anyone else?" Gary asked.

"Yeah. Saffron and Celadon, of course, and Indigo Plateau."

"The Elite Four?" Gary exchanged a look with Ivy. "It's so bad that you'd wanna involve them?"

The room they were in was an office with a few wooden desks pushed against the walls and littered with papers. A few people operated here, but there was no sign of them now. Jenny pulled some chairs out from behind the desks and offered the trio a seat.

"I guess I should start at the beginning," Jenny said. "The Kanto Radio Tower was supposed to be Lavender's new Power Plant in terms of scope and cash flow to the town. You probably know we don't have a Gym here, so the Police Department makes do. We do our best to protect the town from the wild Pokémon in Rock Tunnel and the surrounding wilds. In the past if it's gotten bad, Saffron's been good about sending us some reinforcements for a price, but they were reliable. That all stopped when the new tariff system went into play."

"We heard it's been hitting Lavender pretty hard," Gary acknowledged.

"Yeah, and that's why the town got so fired up about finishing the work on the Radio Tower to get it running. That's when Team Rocket showed up. First, they were willing to replace the services Saffron wasn't offering anymore in terms of protection and merc work, that kind of thing. But they also had people with experience running huge telecom services from Goldenrod in Johto."

"Yeah, the Goldenrod Radio Tower," Ivy said. "That opened just a couple months before I, um, relocated out here. Now that you mention it, I remember Team Rocket having a hand in that project."

"I don't know much about it. It's not exactly easy to get any kind of cooperation from our counterparts in Johto, you can understand. But in any case, Team Rocket had the tech and the knowledge to get us running. And that was all the mayor needed to sign an exclusive contract with them."

The bitter twang in her tone was not lost on Gary. "I'm guessing you didn't like that idea."

"Those of us in law enforcement were leery of outsiders coming in. Like I said, we're a small town, and we take care of our own. But there wasn't anything really shady about Team Rocket that I could dig up, and everywhere they seemed to doing public works. Handling the trash business in Viridian, managing farms for Pewter, you know."

Ivy made a face. "Yeah, real friends of the people."

"Unfortunately, my department didn't realize what they were up to until they were already here. I got word from Cerulean when I sent a request for help with Team Rocket. The Gym Leader there was really adamant about making sure we didn't do business with Team Rocket, that they couldn't be trusted." She nodded to Gary. "So when I saw that Cascade Badge, I knew you guys were all right."

"Misty," Ash said. "But she didn't send help?"

Jenny shook her head. "No resources to spare. These days it seems like even money isn't enough to sway people. Not that Lavender's got much with the Power Plant going to pot."

"So Team Rocket's at the Radio Tower now?" Gary asked. "Why haven't the police booted them out?"

"That's just it. We can't get in there. They've got a few tough trainers with them, and as you can see, my police force is now one woman strong." She clenched her fists and stared at her knees. "My colleagues all got sick."

"Shit," Ash said. "They're all dead?"

"Every one of them. It swept through here like a plague, just got progressively worse over time. We still don't know what it is or why it's here..."

She trailed off and Ivy leaned forward in her chair to try to catch her eye. "But you have some idea, don't you?"

Jenny looked up, gaze hard. "This didn't start until Team Rocket started broadcasting at the Radio Tower. I have no idea what they're doing up there, but I know there's a connection. There's gotta be. And, well, this *is* Lavender."

"What's that s'posed to mean?" Ash asked.

Jenny gestured around her with her hands. "You know the history,

don't you? About the Ghosts that haunt this place?"

"Ghosts?" Ivy petted Umbreon, who was lying on her lap but still agitated.

"Ghost-type Pokémon," Gary clarified. "Hardly anyone's seen one, and when they do it's usually followed by some kind of disaster, like hallucinations that lead you to walk off a cliff. That kind of thing."

"Great," Ash said. "And I was sure this place couldn't get any weirder."

"It's more than just Ghost-type Pokémon. Lavender's always been a graveyard for people and Pokémon alike. Archeologists zoned this area many years back and found evidence of mass graves buried deep underground. They thought Pokémon used to come here en masse to live out the last of their days."

"You mean, they knew when they would die?" Ivy asked.

"That's the theory. Not all Pokémon, of course, but certain species, like Cubone and Marowak, for example. Anyway, the war with Johto also cost us a heavy body count, people and Pokémon. Everyone was buried here. The land here is redolent with spiritual energy. At least, that's the allure. We get a lot of tourists looking for real Ghosts, amateurs most of them. But sometimes we attract the real thing, real spirit Mediums that come here to cleanse the graves at the House of Memories."

"You're serious?" Gary asked. "People actually think they can cleanse the gravesites?"

"I'm perfectly serious. It might seem silly since there hasn't been an incident in our lifetimes, but I'm told that decades ago, there was an insurgence of sorts. The Ghosts were angry about graves getting desecrated, and it took a powerful Medium to calm them down. She did it, and ever since there haven't been any problems. Until now. It's gotten so bad that people and Pokémon are dropping like flies. At this rate, the whole town will die out."

"So Ghost Pokémon are behind this," Ash said. "I guess that makes sense if they've got supernatural powers and stuff. But what's wrong with them? Why're they hurting people?"

"I'm guessing that's where Team Rocket comes in," Ivy said. "You said this didn't start until they showed up."

"That's exactly what I've been thinking. But I have no idea how they can control the Ghosts, if that's even what they're doing. Only a handful of people in the whole world can actually tame Ghosts."

"So what happened to the Medium who helped out last time?" Gary asked.

"I don't know." She paused, frowning. "Actually, someone might know. Mr. Fuji, the caretaker of the House of Memories, is an old man who's lived here practically forever. He was a young guy when the last insurgence happened, and he would know about the Medium. If not, he might at least know where to find one."

"Then what're we waiting for?" Ivy said. "Let's go talk to him."

"We can't."

"Why not?"

"Because," Jenny said, standing. "The Ghosts have him."

The morning sun reflected a deep, glimmering violet against the sublime mountains surrounding Indigo Plateau, a phenomenon that gave the city its name. The largest mountain in the chain, Mt. Silver, stood tall and proud, lonely as its peak disappeared into the low-hanging clouds. But Agatha barely noticed the sublime scenery as she tightened the saddle on her Golbat and double-checked her pack. Her watch ticked the seconds off, each one a small but loud crack in her ear as she counted them. The sun was getting higher in the sky by the minute.

"How long will this take?"

Lance stood near the roof access door of the Elite Four compound, a stone castle a thousand years old and still standing as tall and proud as Mt. Silver itself. His cape billowed in the strong breeze. He made no move to approach his colleague.

"Every minute I waste talking to you is another minute I'll be away," Agatha said.

"This isn't our problem."

Agatha adjusted a buckle on Golbat's saddle that had been giving her some trouble. Her spindly fingers ached as she fiddled with the thick

leather and bent it into the buckle. "It's no one's problem. That's just the problem."

Lance chuckled. "You're too sentimental. Lavender's as good as gone, anyway. We all knew this would happen eventually. Human beings were never meant to go on living there."

Agatha snorted. "You talk like this is an inevitable stroke of fate. It's not. I've seen it before."

She finished with Golbat's saddle and hastily climbed up on the large bat's back, testing the fit.

"Whatever you say. But do hurry back. I'd hate to receive word that you failed."

Agatha shot him a glare. Her dark eyes followed the wisping, red flames that rose off him, barely there, like a trick in her periphery vision. They flickered erratically, blending with his eyes, his hair, the veins that throbbed full of blood. Whispers in her ears, incoherent, drew cold fingers down her spine. She looked away and blinked the searing image from her mind's eye before the voices grew too loud to ignore.

"I'll return in a few days."

With that, Agatha directed her Golbat to lift off into the air. Lance watched her fly away to the southeast, arms crossed.

"That gives me plenty of time, then," he said to himself.

Agatha squinted through her goggles against the whipping wind as she steered Golbat in the direction of Lavender Town. She passed over Pallet Town and scanned it with her eyes, picking out people milling about in the process of rebuilding after the incident that had razed half the town months ago. She swallowed hard, and the whispers in her ears grew curious.

"No," she said. "Not here."

Laughter echoed in her head, a distant memory against her ear. There was a time when the sound sent her cowering barefoot in the dark alone, wishing for death. Until she realized even death would not provide an escape from this torment.

"You'll get your chance."

Beneath her, Golbat beat onward, oblivious to the voices that lingered, and the violet shadows they cast in her wake.

Night had fallen by the time Jenny finished catching the trio up on what had been happening in Lavender for the past months. They told her about the family they'd encountered on their way south from Cerulean, and she confirmed that a few families had tried to leave Lavender when the disease started spreading and killing. But most of them didn't get far without Pokémon to protect them and carting the sickly.

"We have to stop this," Ash said. "Whatever's causing it, Team Rocket, the Ghosts, whatever. It has to stop."

"I'm afraid it's not that simple. I don't exactly have a lot of resources here to get anything done." Jenny looked out the window. "And besides, it's nightfall. We should stay inside."

"What, why? What happens at night?" Gary asked.

Jenny crossed her arms for warmth. "Nights have always been a, well, shall we say 'hallowed' time of day in Lavender. Our largest festival even happens at night on the solstice. Recently, nights have gotten a lot darker, and I don't mean just literally. It started happening just about a week ago. The disease was slowly killing people from the beginning, but it's gotten worse. I've gotten reports that sick people have been found wandering at night when they should be bedridden and causing trouble. Banging on doors, breaking things, that sort of thing. Then the other day an elderly couple were found dead in their home, torn apart. A few Pokémon have been found in the middle of the street, torn asunder from the inside. Really unexplainable things like that. The townspeople think the sick people are going around attacking innocents, but so far no one's been able to prove it. No one goes out at night to bother."

"All the more reason for us to do something *now*," Ash said. "If people are hurting each other, we have to stop this."

"I'm with Ash," Ivy said. "Besides, the dark doesn't bother me."

Gary let his eyes linger on Ivy a moment too long to go unnoticed, but he said nothing of it. "You're sure no one's agreed to send help?" he asked.

"That I know of. I've been sending out SOS signals for weeks, and it's

been dead silent. I would've thought at least someone would do something. I guess that's the world we live in."

Ash got up, startling Pikachu, who scrambled after him. "Not anymore. *We're* here, and we're gonna help."

Jenny looked between the three of them. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you're a bunch of kids. What can you do that my colleagues couldn't do when they were still around? Four isn't really a big step up from one."

"All it takes is one," Ivy said. "One person to stand up and do something. Four's better." She drew the knife at her thigh and admired its serrated blade. "Besides, I'm bored just sitting around here."

"You said this Mr. Fuji might know more about the Ghosts?" Gary said.

"That's right."

"Then I think we should go find him first, then worry about Team Rocket and the Radio Tower."

"Awesome," Ash said. "Then let's get go—"

A woman screamed on the other side of the door, and something heavy hit the wall with a thump. Feet pounded as bodies scrambled about the room, and more people screamed and shouted in terror.

"What the hell?"

Jenny went to open the door, but before she could reach it, the door burst off its hinges and a heavy body fell through into the small office. It was a woman's body, fleshy and soft. Purple veins shone through her translucent skin, and there were lacerations along her arms where she'd cut herself in the fall. But they did not bleed. When she started to struggle to stand, Jenny tried to help her.

"Ma'am, are you alright?"

The woman pushed herself up on shaky hands and looked up through her stringy, dirty hair. Her eyes were ringed with ugly, black and blue splotches. But her eyes themselves were bloodshot black, like someone had dripped ink in her eyes. Jenny, startled, recoiled just as the woman opened her mouth and garbled something unintelligible. Whispers.

Ash covered his ears, but they grew louder. More of the infirm stumbled to the doorway as the woman dragged herself up. Like her, they were also covered in inflamed veins and saw through sooty eyes. Their babbling was a thousand voices strong, and Ash backed away instinctively.

Out of nowhere, Umbreon leaped to attack and bit down hard on the woman's pale arm. Dark energy seeped from the feline's sharp teeth and poured into the puncture wounds. The woman screamed and flailed to get Umbreon off. It let go and skidded across the floor, hissing and spitting, and the woman stumbled backward. Her arm leaked a black, smoky substance, and she clutched it in agony.

"We need to leave!" Gary shouted as he ran to the back of the room toward the door there.

Jenny raced after him and fumbled with her keys to unlock it. Ash could only stare as the urge to dig his fingernails into his own scalp overwhelmed him. Ivy grabbed his arm and scooped Pikachu up in her free hand.

"Ash, *move*!"

Umbreon was hot on their heels, fur standing on end, when Jenny managed to get the back door unlocked and the four of them spilled out of the courthouse. Outside, the mist hit them like a wet blanket in the face. It had grown thicker, and now it was hard to see more than twenty or thirty feet ahead. The moon was a slim crescent overhead and offered little light. Only the street lamps, which were few and far between, lit a path along the main street.

"Oh, shit," Ivy said.

The houses that had before been dark and quiet opened their doors to release more sickly people and some Pokémon. A ghastly Tauros lumbered out with its tongue lolling and patches of fur missing. Its black eyes fixed upon the four trainers, and it lowered its head to charge.

"Hydro Pump!" Gary said.

Golduck dug its webbed claws into the ground and spat out a pressurized jet of water at the Tauros before it could ram them. The Hydro Pump hit the mad bull in the chest and knocked it down into two wandering people. Tauros's weight crushed their bones as they toppled together.

Once they made themselves known, the sickly people converged on the trainers like zombies commanded by unseen forces, driven by instinct. In their haggard states, they were clumsy and slow, but their direction was true. Ivy released Houndour, and when the black canine got a wiff of the air, it bared its teeth in a snarl.

"We have to get to the House of Memories!" Jenny said.

"But these people need help!" Ash said. "We can't just leave them!"

"Dark Pulse!"

Houndour and Umbreon joined forces and released a sinister wave of black energy that hit the zombified people and Pokémon coming toward them. Bodies went flying, and the dark energy cut through them like knives. A young man that got hit in the chest sank to his knees and fell over, unmoving. Black smoke rose from his corpse, and Ash gaped in horror as the sound of laughter drifted on the mists to his ears. Faster than a flash, two glowing, red eyes blinked at him through the miasma before disappearing among the mists once more.

"Did you see that?"

But the others were busy using their Pokémon to fend off the attackers.

"We can't just kill them all!" Jenny said, backing away. "They're just sick!"

"Well we can't let them kill us!" Ivy said.

Gary was having trouble with a group of zombies and a hefty Poliwrath that had cornered him by a lamp post and cut him off from the others. Growlithe and Golduck were working together to scare off the people, but to little avail. One of the zombie people, a young woman in a shit-stained dress, lunged for him. She tore at his face and neck with her hands, trying to claw him to shreds as he fought her off at an awkward angle against the lamp post.

"Gary!"

Ivy ran after him and threw her knife without a second thought. It landed in the woman's back between the shoulder blades, and she let out a bone-chilling shriek before convulsing and crumpling to the ground. The wound smoked with a dark, violet hue, and more laughter echoed in the air.

"Get up." Ivy hauled him to his feet just as more zombies quickly replaced the one that had fallen. The Poliwrath took off running, fists poised to grind them to a pulp, but Golduck intervened with a mighty Headbutt and knocked it off course.

Before Ash knew what hit him, he had his own attackers to contend with. Jenny had Growlithe and Parasect out and fighting as best they could, so Ash reached for Charmeleon's and Wartortle's Pokéballs.

"Give us some space!"

The two Pokémon materialized in a flash of light just as a Rhyhorn drooling black saliva and a group of three pre-teen kids joined the fray. Charmeleon was more than happy to oblige and loosed a Flamethrower at the Rhyhorn, but the rocky Pokémon took the attack head-on without so much as a flinch. The kids and an old man with hollowed eyes ran at Ash, hands out and itching for flesh to rip.

"Pikachu!"

The yellow rodent exploded in electricity that snapped along the ground at the charging zombies' feet, startling them, but it wasn't enough to stop them. Ash backed away, eyes wide, as he realized they weren't going to leave him alone.

"Wartortle, to me!"

The blue turtle leaped into the air and spat out a jet of water that hit the people in their legs and sent them falling. But the Rhyhorn had caught up with Charmeleon and was attempting to catch it in its powerful jaws.

"Damnit, Aqua Jet!"

Wartortle turned around and sprayed the Rhyhorn, but ended up grazing Charmeleon. The orange lizard snarled and released dark smoke from its maw. The distraction cost Ash precious seconds, and the zombies were upon him. One of the kids slashed her long nails across his chest, but Misty's armor protected him easily enough. Ash grabbed her by the shoulders and threw her down just as the old man tackled him to the ground. Ash looked up into the eyes of his attacker just in time to see the old man part his lips in a wolfish grin, revealing only four teeth in his gums and a rancid smell of tobacco, alcohol, and rot. His eyes had bled black, and Ash saw himself reflected in their glassy depths just as the old man tried to dig his fingers into Ash's neck.

"Get off!"

The old man opened his mouth, and more susurrations bombarded Ash as though they came from all directions. None of them made any sense, and the old man's fingernails had punctured his neck and begun to dig in.

But just as suddenly as he'd attacked, the old man stilled and stared down at Ash. Blind and sickly, he gave no twitch of familiarity or other proof of sight, and yet his unseeing eyes roved over Ash's face. The whispers from his mouth grew louder and more forceful until a single voice made up of all the others rang clear in his head as though it were his own:

Imago.

Ash, shaking in fear, put all his might into a roll and flipped the old man under him. Then he pulled back a fist and slugged the guy in the face as hard as he could. The little kids jumped at the chance to ambush Ash, but he saw them coming in his peripheral vision.

"Fry 'em!"

Pikachu needed little prompting and delivered a bright Thunderbolt that electrocuted the kids in their boots. The smell of burning flesh made Ash's eyes water, and he looked away as Pikachu powered down. The old man writhed underneath him and, unbidden, snapped his jaw open so far it disengaged from his skull. A roiling, violet ether snaked up from the man's gaping maw coiled toward Ash, but he scrambled away to safety. Pikachu sparked in warning, and the strobe light effect illuminated the area in flickers. The breath left Ash's lungs as he made out what looked like a deformed, human skull amidst the rising smoke bearing yellowed fangs. Lurid eyes alighted on him through the gloom and squinted with glee as it laughed.

"Flamethrower!"

Jenny's Growlithe launched a molten jet of fire at the apparition, dispelling it but not the echo of its laughter.

"Come on, kid!" She hauled him to his feet. "We have to move. More are coming!"

Ash fell into step with her and glanced over his shoulder to search for Gary and Ivy, but they were nowhere to be found in the thick mists.

"Charmeleon! Wartortle!"

The two Pokémon were still contending with the zombified Rhyhorn, but at their trainer's call they fell back so as not to be left behind. Pikachu ran alongside them, while Jenny's Parasect and Growlithe were up ahead. He barely saw where she was leading him through the impenetrable fog and the blanket of night, but Lavender was a small town and it didn't take them long to run into more zombies.

This time, Ash didn't hesitate.

"Clear a path!" he ordered his Pokémon.

Wartortle withdrew into its shell and Rapid Spun its way through a handful of converging, bloodless zombies. Its hard shell struck them in the chest, ricocheting between them and hitting a teenaged girl in the neck, lopping her head clean off. A large horde of Exeggcute rolled toward the group and flung themselves at Jenny, who rolled on the ground to avoid the deadly Egg Bombs. Ash looked away as Charmeleon loosed a Flamethrower and burned up the horde. The few dozen, possessed eggs popped and sizzled, and when the smoke cleared there was nothing but burning tar left.

"Hurry, it's just up ahead!"

Ash swallowed the bile in his throat and made to run after Jenny, but when he took a step he tripped over himself. The ground was gone, and a huge abyss opened up between him and Jenny, who was leaving him behind.

"The fuck... Jenny!"

Jenny didn't hear him, and the ground split around him. Hands reached up from the darkness and grabbed at his pant legs. They oozed where their skin had cracked with gangrene and exposed bone and atrophied muscles barely hanging on. Ash's head burst with pain, and he cried out before falling to his hands and knees.

"Pika...chu..." he moaned.

The hands wandered up his back and raked their nails along his armor, tearing deep into it to get to the scars on his back. His head throbbed with every heartbeat, rhythmic with the cachinnations that echoed in his mind. Rotted fingers dug into his arms, his calves, the soft skin of his thighs.

"Pikachu!"

A burst of light flashed and cracked the ground near Ash's head. The light and sound rendered him deaf and blind, like a flash grenade had gone off in his face. He doubled over and threw up over the edge of the abyss, but when the flash of thunder dissipated, there was no abyss to be seen.

"Ash!"

Someone was calling his name as he wretched, and he wiped his mouth, shaking. Something nudged him in the side, and Ash blinked, willing his vision to clear. Pikachu looked up at him, still sparking with electricity. Jenny was just a few feet away dealing with a middle-aged woman attempting to tear her face off, but Parasect fought back with with a merciless Razor Leaf attack that chewed the woman up.

"Hey, buddy," Ash said, coughing. "You really saved me."

Pikachu squeaked up at him. A warmth so intense it was a bit uncomfortable drew up to his other side. Charmeleon growled low in its throat and swished its tail, dispelling mist with its eternal flame. Ash's head no longer hurt, but he followed Charmeleon's gaze to the thing agitating it. A lumpy shape took form on the ground. It billowed, semisolid, but it had defined features—hands with curved talons, Nidorino-like quills on its back, large ears, or possibly horns. But like the apparitions Ash had seen earlier, this one had a visible skeleton in the right light. The bones undulated among shadows, a trick of the mind or maybe not. Looking at it too long was like looking into fire, and Ash didn't trust his eyes.

It opened red eyes that trained on Ash and his Pokémon, and the same, maniacal laughter filled his head. The thing, a Ghost or a Pokémon or maybe both, bared wicked, sharp teeth in a cheshire smile that sent a bolt of fear through Ash's heart. Pikachu sparked and Charmeleon got on all fours, smoking. And all Ash could do was stare.

"What are you?"

The whispers filled his ears again, but Pikachu and Charmeleon didn't seem to hear them. They grew louder, like a swarm of bees, until they culminated in a single message:

Imago.

"What the hell're you doing back there!" Jenny said from up ahead.

The whispers coming from the creature, a Ghost Pokémon if Ash had to guess, intensified. Languages Ash couldn't understand, gibberish perhaps, or something older than time itself. He covered his ears.

"I can hear you!" he shouted over the whispers drowning out his own thoughts.

The creature smiled wider and half dissipated into a smoky substance, but retained its general shape. It floated toward Ash, and Charmeleon lost its patience. But just as the fiery lizard was prepared to blast the Ghost into oblivion, something shifted in the air and caused the Ghost to falter. The whispers ceased abruptly, and through the aftershock of so much noise Ash made out a lilting melody playing from somewhere to the east. It sent tingling shivers down his spine, and he covered his ears again to blot it out, though it did no good. The Ghost jerked unnaturally and broke its grin. It faded to smoke in a silent scream of agony, and the smoke disappeared into the mist. Charmeleon chased after it a few steps but abandoned the chase when it realized it would get lost running around blind.

"What the hell, Ash?" Jenny held out a hand to him and helped him up. "We have to get inside."

"Yeah, sorry. Ahh..." He rubbed his ears and blinked rapidly to dispel the double vision he was beginning to see. "What *is* that?"

"Music coming from the Radio Tower. Never mind that, just *move*!"

Wartortle rolled toward Ash and poked its head out of its shell. Ash recalled it to its Pokéball so they could run, and he followed Jenny. Charmeleon and Pikachu loped along beside them with Jenny's Growlithe and Parasect leading the way. The mist swallowed their wake, but it didn't drown out the groaning and shuffling of their pursuers. Ash almost tripped over a gravemarker as he ran, but Jenny steadied him before he could faceplant and break his nose on the granite.

"It's just ahead," she said.

The Rhyhorn that had attacked Charmeleon and Wartortle before stomped on the gravemarker just as Ash cleared it, sending chunks of granite flying.

"Goddamn!"

The graveyard surrounding the House of Memories stretched far

ahead, a wide expanse several acres in breadth. But the Rhyhorn giving chase roared, a gurgling sound like it was drowning, and didn't keep after Ash and Jenny. None of the zombies did. Stranger still, the mists were receding little by little the deeper Ash and Jenny went into the graveyard, and it became easier to see. Charmeleon huffed beside Ash and trailed black smoke, still wary of enemy threats.

After about ten minutes of running undisturbed, they came upon the House of Memories and stopped at the wrap-around porch stairs. Catching his breath, it was only now that Ash noticed the dead silence. There were no whispers, no groaning, no shuffling feet sneaking up behind him. He looked back through the gloom, noting the lanterns spaced out throughout the gravesite that cast ambient halos of light over the hallowed grounds. The air was so clear and crisp here, so unlike the rest of Lavender. Ash looked away and focused on the painted mansion.

"Before we go in there," Jenny said, "we don't know what we'll find. This place is considered a holy place. I'm not superstitious, but that back there," she pointed behind them, "was real enough to me. Are you ready?"

Ash rubbed his neck where the phantom fingers had raked through his flesh in the illusion the Ghost conjured before. It was so real that even now, he could still feel the shadow of jagged nails tenderizing his muscles just below the skin. Pikachu squeaked and looked up at him expectantly. Ash held out his arm and the little rodent hopped up and settled on his shoulder.

"Not like we gotta choice," Ash said.

Jenny nodded stiffly. "Mr. Fuji should be in there somewhere. If we can find him, maybe we can put a stop to...whatever this is. And we'll find Gary and Ivy when it's done."

In the distance, the hair-raising lullaby coming from the Radio Tower sent unpleasant, almost painful tingling sensations up Ash's spine. His joints ached just listening to it, and he rubbed his ears.

"Yeah. Not maybe, definitely."

Gary, Ivy... You better be okay.

Ash and Jenny walked up the porch stairs and opened the front door, and together they stepped into the stale darkness within.

10. Lavender Town, Part 2

Triumvirate, chapter 10: Lavender Town, Part 2
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Gary fell hard on his back and got the wind knocked out of him. He fought the couple seconds of suffocation and rolled just as the mad Poliwrath punched the ground where his head had been and left a small crater under its fist. Gary choked for air as he came face to face with the fighting frog and its stygian stare. Like the sickly humans, Poliwrath's veins coursed black under its etiolated skin and pulsed with each heartbeat. He scrambled backward and fumbled for a Pokéball at his belt.

"Look out!"

Ivy slammed into a zombified man charging straight for Gary and sent him crashing into a lamp post. She retrieved her knife, which came away bloodless, but more dark fumes leaked from the wound. Gary got to his feet and released Aerodactyl's Pokéball.

"Air Cutter!"

Aerodactyl squawked in surprise as it materialized mid-flight, but it swooped around and flapped its leathery wings in a hard thrust that sent a razor sharp gale careening straight for Poliwrath. The big Pokémon took the hit in the back, and Gary shielded his face as the wind blade cleaved right through it. An arm and shoulder went flying off to the left, and Poliwrath's head split down the middle at an angle. Chunks of slippery flesh hit Gary on his chest and the arm that protected his face. More curling smoke rose from the Poliwrath's carcass and coiled like a serpent, sentient.

A strong hand closed around his elbow and hauled him to his feet. "Come *on*!"

Ivy dragged him away from Poliwrath's remains and they ran blindly away from the amassing sick people. They poured out of houses and emerged from side streets in various states of decay and degradation. Some had soiled themselves on their sick beds and trailed putrid excrement in their wake. Others bore lacerations that didn't bleed, but folded their pale flesh back like raw dough.

"We lost Ash!" Gary said as they ran.

"He's with Jenny. I saw them going toward the House of Memories."

"I can't see five feet in front of me in this dark fog. How the *hell* can you—"

The ground burst just in front of them and caused them to lose their balance. The blast pushed Gary back several feet, while Ivy skidded in the opposite direction. From the rubble, a Hitmonlee emerged on shaky legs, slumped over. A group of five or six more people, all young, jogged up behind it in some semblance of formation.

"Aerodactyl!"

The big reptile swooped in and tore into the nearest person, a man in a tattered nightgown, and dragged him by the shoulder. The man lost his balance and tried to swat at Aerodactyl with his spindly, blood-drained hands, but Aerodactyl squawked angrily and ripped the arm clean off. The man tumbled to the ground, but he got up and trudged back toward the fray. The maimed stump at his shoulder exposed broken bone and ripped muscles, but he kept coming as though nothing had happened.

"What the fuck," Gary said, gritting his teeth. "What is this!"

Ivy screamed, and he searched around for her through the gloom. She was busy battling with two people, a man and a woman, that had ganged up on her. Gary tried to jump over the rubble and get to her, but the Hitmonlee was in his path. One of Ivy's attackers yanked her arm back, and it popped. She grunted and swung around with her knife, connecting with the man's skull through the eye socket. She straddled him and they both went down. Umbreon and Houndour tackled the woman with sharp fangs and claws. The smell of roasting flesh filled the air as Houndour's Fire Fang ripped through infected muscle and bone.

Hitmonlee jumped high into the air and brought its powerful leg down for a High Jump Kick. Gary saw a grey streak fly by to his right, and Golduck was loping toward him, sensing the danger.

"Keep it airborne!" he shouted.

Golduck shot a powerful water jet almost ninety degrees straight up that crashed into Hitmonlee and knocked it off course. Gary raised his arm to get Aerodactyl's attention, but the Pokémon was already way ahead of him and opened its elongated jaw in a screech.

"Wing Attack!"

Aerodactyl slammed into the Hitmonlee in midair with a sickening crack and sent the Fighter hurtling back to the ground, where it landed with an explosion of rock and debris. The disturbance knocked back more of the zombie people converging on Gary's location, and he tried to get to Ivy again.

"Ivy!"

Her arm hung limp at her side as she rose off the dead man, and with one fluid motion she popped it back into place with a grunt of pain. The same dark smoke Gary had seen before rose from the mutilated man's skull, and Ivy backed away, clutching her knife. It drifted closer to her, and Gary saw flashes of red within the darkness. Instantly, Umbreon was by Ivy's side and hissed. The thing in the smoke recoiled and released a piercing scream that was more of an echo than the actual thing. It reverberated to the bone, and Gary froze in a cold terror the likes of which he'd never known. Houndour leaped at the apparition and snapped its jaws around the billowy smoke, trailing dark energy. The Crunch attack dispelled the gaseous being with a final scream. Ivy wiped her mouth and nose and looked around for Gary.

From the fallen Hitmonlee's carcass, a sinister, purple hand pulled itself out of a crack in the Pokémon's protective shell, followed by an amorphous, disembodied head. Red eyes swiveled within its gaseous body, and the dark mists that composed it parted in a serrated smile.

Gary recovered from the shock of seeing *whatever* that thing had been and once again tried to reach Ivy, but she met his gaze and dropped her jaw in horror.

Ivy, he wanted to say, but the word died in his throat when something pierced her from behind. A huge, black spike impaled her through the heart and she arched back in shock and pain. Gary's eyes widened and his mouth went dry as all sound, all sight left him and he could only see the vision of her, ripping in two. Another spike burst through her abdomen, and another through her shoulder, her thigh, until she was completely skewered.

"Ivy!"

He reached for her, vision blurring as tears filled his eyes and fell behind him. She slumped to the ground, dripping blood, and her eyes, those big, blue eyes, drooped. Gary screamed, and a lancing pain shot

through his temple, crippling him. He clutched his head, unable to think as the pain consumed him. Doubled over on the ground, eyes screwed shut, he twisted in agony.

"Gary!"

A blast of cool, misty air hit him like an ocean wave, washing the pain away with it. He gasped for air and opened his eyes wide. A mystical, blue light surrounded him, and he was floating a few inches above the ground.

"Gary, hey!"

He looked up and Ivy was running toward him, perfectly alive and well. She thrust an arm forward, and Houndour leaped into the air over Gary's head, jaws gnashing. Gary followed its arc and saw its target, a mass of violet gas hiding furious, red eyes in a deformed, humanoid skull. A disembodied hand swept forward and sent out a frigid wave of energy that Gary tried to protect himself from with his hand, but the blue barrier protecting him released and negated the Shadow Ball attack before it could hit him. Houndour plowed right through the amorphous creature, causing it to shriek and float backward out of range in fear.

With the soothing, blue aura gone, Gary once again inhaled the humid darkness and coughed. Golduck squatted next to him. The jewel on its forehead emitted a soft, crimson glow, and its eyes faded from ghastly white back to their normal black as the Confusion effects dissipated. Gary rolled over and hauled himself to his feet.

"What the hell're you doing lying around back here," Ivy said, grabbing his hand. "The Radio Tower's just up ahead, and we need to hurry—"

Gary pulled her to him and embraced her with all his strength. She went rigid in his hold and tried to squirm free. He didn't let her.

"Gary, let go— Hey, come on, what're you doing? We can't just stand here."

"I watched you die," he said against her long hair. His throat clenched and he choked suppressing the beginnings of a sob. "I watched you die."

She relaxed a little, and he let her pull back. Cold hands found their way to the sides of his face, and she searched his eyes. "I'm right here."

His heart was racing a mile a minute with the aftereffects of the hallucination, and his fingers trembled as he took her hands in his.

"I'm right here," she said again. "You can't get ridda me so easy."

Tears prickled in his eyes, and he laughed without thinking. "I know. Believe me, I know."

She smiled up at him, and he lost a piece of himself in her eyes, so endlessly blue, eyes that could see in the dark. Golduck clucked and drew their attention just as the Ghost reformed, severely weakened from Houndour's and Golduck's attacks.

"Oh my god!"

An older woman in a smock with cuts on her face wandered closer to Gary and Ivy.

"P-Please, help! They attacked me!"

Gary held onto Ivy and gave her a squeeze on her arm. "She's normal?"

"Please, I need your help! You're not sick, right?"

"Gary," Ivy said in warning.

"We'll help you," he said. "It's okay, we've got Pokémon. Golduck."

Golduck ambled toward the woman, and behind the pair, Houndour snarled viciously.

"It's the Ghost," Ivy said. "It's recovering!"

She fumbled for her Pokédex and snapped a picture of the spirit as it flexed its disembodied hands.

"Haunter," Ivy read. "What the... There's a ton of info here!"

The woman struggled toward them, but just as Golduck reached her, the Radio Tower up ahead came to life and emitted an eerie dirge at full volume. The song's lilting cadence sent a twinge of trepidation down Gary's spine. Golduck paused and looked around, curious about the new sound.

"Shit!"

Ivy's exclamation was followed by her grabbing Gary's collar and

yanking him down to the ground. A ghastly shadow passed over them as the Haunter began to roil erratically, like it was imploding in on itself in rapid-fire succession. Umbreon hissed and swished its tail menacingly, and Houndour bounded after the Ghost as it zigzagged through the air. Worst of all was its screeching, like the aftermath of a scream in a hollow place, but indelible. Gary started to see double as the sound made his head spin.

"No, stay away!" the woman said, stumbling backward. "Stay back!"

Gary and Ivy watched with wide eyes as the Haunter slammed into the woman, and she convulsed. Her eyes rolled back into her head, and her hair turned a shocking white before their eyes. She gripped her face with her fingers and covered her ears to blot out the sound of the Radio Tower's horrid melody, but to no avail. She sank to her knees, cracking them on the hard ground. Ivy flinched, and Gary pulled her back with him to put as much distance between them and the seizing woman as possible.

"To me!" He raised an arm and signaled to his Pokémon.

Golduck loped toward Gary just as Aerodactyl, who'd been busy attacking from the sky, landed next to him. The possessed woman's veins popped out against her lightening skin, pulled tight, and they swelled thick and violet. And when she opened her eyes again, fearful, brown eyes, the veins of toxin seeped into the irises and drowned them in darkness.

"Oh, you gotta be *fucking kidding* me," Ivy said.

The woman, no longer really a woman, rose on shaky legs. Her knees were busted to hell and she wobbled, but the pain didn't stop her from making her way as quickly as she could toward Gary and Ivy. She opened her mouth wide and a pernicious cackling echoed from everywhere at once. Gary and Ivy got to their feet.

"We have to get to the Radio Tower," he said.

"Glad to have you on board finally! C'mon!"

Ivy took off at a sprint, giving the haunted woman a wide berth. Gary was quick to follow, signaling for Aerodactyl to fly while he and Golduck ran. The Haunter was persistent, but the woman's physical injuries prevented it from making much headway, and Gary and Ivy soon outpaced the zombie.

The Radio Tower lay just ahead, the same as earlier, except now the topmost floor was lit up. Someone was up there. They ran without stopping and burst through the Radio Tower's front doors. Aerodactyl squawked angrily, unable to fly inside.

"Keep watch outside," Gary said, patting the reptile on its neck. "Watch for my signal."

Aerodactyl snapped its huge jaw and its tongue lolled over rows of sharp teeth, but it begrudgingly took to the skies again and disappeared in the fog.

"Sure you wanna do that?"

Ivy was clutching her sore shoulder further inside.

"Yeah. At least the Ghosts can't get to it so high up."

"Okay. Now, how about that door?"

"Golduck can use Confusion now, apparently." Gary eyed his lone Water Pokémon and grinned. "Make us a path."

Golduck's forehead jewel pulsed with telekinetic energy and its eyes began to glow. The door to the stairs, previously locked from the inside, was enveloped in bright, aquamarine light and rattled violently until it ripped off its hinges and slammed against the high-vaulted windows around the front door, smashing clean through them.

"Equal parts violent and efficient. I like it," Ivy said.

"Wait, lemme see what the Pokédex had to say about Haunter."

They huddled together and scanned through Professor Oak's notes about Haunter and its evolutionary line.

"Looks like I'm taking point on this one," Ivy said. "My Dark-types'll be super effective."

"Not against their illusions." He ran a hand through his hair, damp with sweat and mist. "I think we'll have better luck with Psychic-type moves for those."

"Golduck picked a hell of a time to learn Confusion. Still, after what Jenny said about Ghosts, I'm really surprised Professor Oak has so much intel on them."

"Lately, there's a lot that surprises me about Gramps." He crossed his arms. "You saw how the Haunter freaked out when the radio started broadcasting, right?"

Ivy chuckled. "Team Rocket. I thought I smelled their nasty stench around here. I dunno how they're doing it, but I'll be happy to put an end to whoever's upstairs. Permanently."

"For once, I couldn't agree more."

"Then let's go before those zombie freaks get in here."

With Ivy in the lead, the two of them headed for the stairs and made their way upstairs.

'House' of Memories was an understatement. The palatial interior's winding corridors and many hidden rooms had almost no end, and Ash began to drag his feet from exhaustion trying to remain silent as he and Jenny checked all the rooms. A Grandfather clock ticked and tocked in the living room, the sound somehow audible no matter how far the duo wandered deeper into the house. Charmeleon's tail and Pikachu's natural glow lit a path for them, and they dared not turn on any lights. Jenny tried the next room, which turned out to be a small library. A wide, oaken desk was pushed against the far wall with a green reading lamp, extinguished, on its surface. Books, open and closed and collecting dust, were stacked high, forgotten.

"Talk about a haunted house," Ash mumbled.

"It's like no one's been in here for weeks. Months, even. But how can that be? Mr. Fuji's lived here for years."

"You know what? I'd believe pretty much anything at this point."

They had searched most of the first floor and turned up nothing. Jenny made for the wide staircase that led to the second floor, but Ash paused.

"This is too easy," he said. "It was war out there, and in here, it's like nothing's amiss. I don't like it."

"Let's count our blessings and hope it lasts." Jenny started upstairs. "Come on, we can't waste any more time."

Ash looked down at Charmeleon, who sniffed the air and huffed

smoke.

You don't like it either, do you?

But Jenny was right; they couldn't stop here. So Ash trudged upstairs despite the nagging voice in his head that said this was wrong, so wrong, and they needed to turn back before it was too—

Jenny's scream interrupted Ash's train of thought, and he raced up the stairs. He rounded the corner at the top of the staircase and found her sprawled on the floor. Growlithe and Parasect darted about, searching for the source of Jenny's ailment, but there was nothing to see.

But Ash saw.

A dark aura crept up her arms and settled over her back, an invisible presence that lifted her up onto her knees. The blood drained from Ash's face as fear clutched him in its cold, iron grip. Pikachu sparked in warning, and Charmeleon let out a roar that startled Parasect and Growlithe.

"Leave her alone!" Ash shouted.

The shadow that hovered over Jenny took form. A taloned hand, disembodied, reached up from her back and grasped at the air. The lecherous cackling Ash had now grown accustomed to in his mad dash here blossomed and filled the room, sending Parasect and Growlithe cowering in fear.

"Son of a bitch. You let her go!"

He ran at Jenny and tackled her body to the floor. They rolled together, and he ended up on top after a short struggle. Looking down at her, her once hard, amber eyes blinked open and bled red. Violet smoke emanated from her skin like toxic fumes, and Ash's eyes watered.

"Let her go!"

The whispers picked up again, and he did his best to ignore them. Jenny—or the thing controlling her—opened her mouth and belched out a thick, roiling cloud of black smoke. Ash flinched and jerked his head back. Pikachu rushed to his side, ready to attack but unwilling to shock Jenny.

Jenny convulsed under Ash, and her veins grew dark with whatever

poison the Ghost had infected her with.

"No! Damnit." Ash racked his brain for something that would save her, anything at all. He squeezed his eyes shut, and a single word rang clear in his memory. Yanking Jenny's face closer to his, he locked gazes with the red eyes possessing her.

"Imago," he said with as much confidence as he could muster.

Jenny's eyes widened, and she inhaled a sharp, gasping breath before falling back to the floor and seizing. Ash scrambled off of her, unsure what he'd just done. Violet fumes rose from her body and gathered in a small cloud overhead. It formed hands tipped with deadly talons and split its mouth open to reveal a black, abysmal depth that made Ash's stomach turn just looking at it. The creature's skull flickered in and out of sight and smiled along with the creature itself.

Imago.

The word echoed in Ash's head, but he ignored it and went to Jenny, who had rolled over onto her side and begun vomiting. She curled into herself, and Ash rubbed her back.

"Jenny, hey, can you hear me?"

She cracked her eyes open—amber, just like he remembered—and peered up at him. "Ash?" She wiped her mouth of bile and phlegm. "What happened?"

The engorged veins had receded within her, and while a little pale and clammy, she seemed normal enough.

"I thought I lost you there for a minute."

Growlithe and Parasect surrounded their trainer. Parasect snapped its large claws in warning at the Ghost that hovered overhead, but made no move to stop it.

Imago...

Ash looked up and glared at the Ghost. "Yeah, Imago. Now scram before I fry your ectoplasm."

Jenny gasped when she saw the creature hovering over them. "Th-That's a Haunter," she whispered. "Oh my god, I've never seen one in real life before."

"Haunter?"

Haunter grinned, and its skull nodded emphatically amidst the dark mists that comprised its body.

"Well, I don't care what it is. Get the hell away from us!"

Charmeleon, sensing Ash's ire, growled and spat out a jet of fire at the Ghost. Haunter shrieked and retreated among the paintings lining the walls and disappeared from sight. Ash helped Jenny stand, and she leaned on him.

"What was that?"

"Don't ask me. I'm just glad you're okay."

"No, I mean, how did you calm it down? I could feel it. It was..."

"What?"

Jenny shook her head. "It was terrified. I can't explain it, but I was afraid for Haunter. It's almost like it was looking for a place to hide."

Ash slung her arm around his shoulder so she could walk. He jerked his head, and Charmeleon and Pikachu fell into step in behind them, while Growlithe and Parasect wandered ahead. "I don't care what it wanted. I'm just glad it's gone. You okay to keep moving?"

"Yeah, I think so."

They made slow progress down the hall, and Ash checked the rooms they passed with only a passing glance before moving on. The hallway stretched on and on, and he lost count of how many turns he'd made. It was almost boring, and the boredom fed his paranoia.

Doors opened and closed, and nothing happened. 'Nothing' separated him from the edge of excitement, the engaging, the *real*, and at least Haunter had been *something*. But the emptiness, the repetition that clouded his vision like a veil only hid the true darkness of this place, this House of Memories where there was no light and nothing of the past except dust and a well-trodden path by souls long forgotten to the passage of time. The true darkness, which dwelled behind the closed doors Ash hesitated to open, beyond the turns in the five and a half minute hallways he paced, counting the seconds because he was so *bored.* And behind him, stalking, because boredom was only ever a fabricated shield against the true and ugly elements of the heart, the

darkest of which is and always has been horror.

And horror had never liked to be alone.

Parasect rounded a corner up ahead and stopped in front of a door. Growlithe turned back and panted, expectant.

"Looks like we found something?" Jenny said.

"Maybe. Lemme take a look."

Ash left her to lean on the wall for support and tried the door. It was locked.

"Charmeleon, knock it down."

Charmeleon snarled and huffed, but lowered its head and Headbutted the door with all its might. The frail door blew off its hinges and skidded across the floor into the adjoining room. Ash went in first, while Jenny hobbled in after him using the wall to support herself.

"What the hell?"

The room opened up into a spacious living room with a fireplace built into the far wall. It blazed, but its grey flames emitted no warmth. More than the demonic flames, the stale, heavy air in here hit Ash like a wet wool blanket to the face. He heaved and clutched his throat as his body adjusted to the viscous air. Shadows danced along the walls and floor, a phantasmagoria of terror and delight that churned his stomach and sent him crashing against the nearest wall for balance, feeling drunk. When he looked down, a greyish blob rose from the woven rug at his feet and fixed him with a spectral stare. The whispers hit him like a punch to the gut.

"Ash!" Jenny said from the doorway.

Ash thrust out his hand for her to stay back. Even Pikachu and Charmeleon were paralyzed in place, too afraid to follow Ash inside. Gritting his teeth, Ash pulled back his leg and kicked the yellow-eyed blob creeping toward him. Despite the creature's solid appearance, it disintegrated on contact and poofed into ash and dust. He followed the wisping dust with his eyes and settled on the two figures in the middle of the room causing this.

An old man in a stained, brown suit hovered with his feet just off the floor and clutching his throat. His eyes were rolled back in his head so

only the whites were visible, and he drooled from the sides of his mouth in the beginnings of asphyxiation.

"Oh my god..."

A violet miasma floated around him, surrounding him and culminating in a large mass nearly as tall as the ceiling. Shadows swam in its depths, revealing teeth, disjointed bones, eyes that faded in and out. One of the shadows noticed Ash and took a more concrete shape, revealing an impossibly wide mouth, black and toothless, and a wide-brimmed head. The Ghost swept around and plunged back into the vortex. Ash took a few shaky steps forward, and it took everything he had just to remain upright in the vacuum.

The old man—Fuji, presumably—jerked at an unnatural angle as a plume of violet gas rose off him, drawing dark veins along his neck where it emerged. Red eyes blinked open and alighted on Ash.

"Stop!" Ash's voice was drowned out by the howling whispers that congregated in this place.

The Ghost inhabiting Fuji grinned, and its half-formed hands boiled with energy that it threw at Ash like a baseball. Ash faltered and put up his hands to block the Shadow Ball, but before it could hit him something rammed him from behind. Paralyzed, Ash took the attack in the chest at full force and wrenched open his mouth in a silent scream. Somewhere behind him, Jenny shouted something unintelligible. The voices grew louder in his head as the Shadow Ball's malevolent energy coursed through him.

Gasping for air, he forced his eyes open and looked down at his chest. The phantom energy ran in gentle sweeps across his body like a barrier. The grey blob-like creatures at his feet retreated in terror from him.

What's going on?

A soft laughter echoed in the back of his mind, and Ash had the strangest sensation of large, heavy hands on his shoulders.

Imago.

A spike of fear ran down his back, and Ash stared at his hands. They glowed a faint purple, coating him like gloves, and his fingertips extended into curved nails that moved with him. In his distraction, he only just now realized the air had become easier to breathe, and his

feet no longer weighed him down like concrete bricks.

"Fúgite!"

A thunderous voice cut through the cacophony and shouted a command that reverberated through the room. The Ghost that had attacked Ash before widened its mouth in a roar and made a swipe for the mass opposite the captive Fuji. The demonic force that had shown itself before rose out of the depths and caught the Ghost's swipe on wispy ribbons that extended from its oblong face. The grey blobs moaned and rushed toward Fuji, amassing into one, amorphous creature that rose up from the floor behind him. Another smoking tendril emerged from his back, a single skull with eyes and no discernible mouth.

"Fúgite!" the forceful voice commanded again.

Something propelled Ash forward, a feeling in his head more than a voice. The invisible hands on his shoulders squeezed and dug shadow nails into his bones, lifting him and making him light.

Fuck this.

He threw caution to the wind and leaped forward, nearly losing his balance when his single step cleared the three or four yards between Fuji and himself. The huge vortex erupted with more eyes, grinning faces, and a spindly hand that reached for him. But Ash reached forward and brought his cloaked hand down over the creature rising from Fuji's back. An explosion of cold, rancid gas dispersed with the Ghost.

"Get out of the way!" said the voice, distinctly human but muffled, as though it were underwater.

Ash ignored it and lunged for the grey blob next, tearing into it with his bare hands. The shadowy talons extending from his fingers raked through it like it was solid, doughy. The disembodied cackling in his head only drove him onward, made his swipes more vicious as he tried to get to the heart of this darkness.

Something ripped into his back and dug knife-like nails through his armor. Ash screamed in pain and rolled to the floor just in time to see the same Ghost with the wide-brimmed head bite into the one that had assaulted him and swallow it whole.

"Fúgite!"

Fuji convulsed as the final Ghost possessing him emerged, nothing more than a gaseous pair of blood-red eyes, and the Ghosts occupying the tornadic mass all converged on it with ravenous hunger. With a wail that was barely there but that rattled Ash to the core, the apparition disappeared and Fuji fell to the floor, unmoving. The blob creature Ash had cut up dissolved into its lesser parts and receded to the roaring fire. Ash watched it go and take the spectral cloak with it, but a heaviness in his body made him reach for it, almost sad, as the flames returned to their natural, orange glow.

"Ash! Oh my god, kid, you okay?"

Pikachu and Charmeleon were at his side in an instant, but Charmeleon hissed and the Pokémon stood their ground a couple feet away. A hand closed around his arm and hauled him up. Ash looked up, expecting to find Jenny, but instead he was looking into two violet eyes that glowed with a light all their own. Fear coursed through his veins, but it wasn't his own.

"You," the woman bellowed. "Imago."

Behind her, three shadows hovered and stared down at him with salacious grins.

"W-What..."

She studied him, and her eyes drifted to a point behind him. "Two in one generation. Impossible..."

Ash pushed the cancerous fear that wasn't his to the back of his mind and yanked his arm free of the old woman's grip. "Who the hell're you?"

"I don't believe it," Jenny said from the opposite wall where she was leaning for support. "Are you...Agatha?"

The old woman stood up straighter and let her haunting eyes rove over Ash, his Pokémon, and finally Jenny. "Who else would I be?"

Fuji groaned and began to stir, and Ash move to help him.

"*Don't*," Agatha said. "Stupid boy. You'll rip his soul apart if you touch him like that." She kneeled down and offered Fuji a hand up. "Minoru, can you hear me?"

Pikachu squeaked nervously, and Ash held out a hand to the little

rodent. "It's okay, buddy. I'm oh..." His hand still shone with sinister, violet light. "...Kay."

"Agatha? Is that you?"

"Ah. Can you stand?"

"Good heavens, I feel like I've taken quite the tumble."

Agatha snorted. "You always were one to downplay everything. Come on, the chairs are just over here."

Ash swiped at the air, marveling at the way the smokey talons on his fingers cut through it like it was something tangible. Jenny had managed to hobble near where Agatha settled Fuji into a reclining chair.

"You," Agatha barked. Ash whirled and came face to face with the short but imposing woman. "Get out."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Not you, boy. That Haunter you're hosting."

The chilling fear Ash had suppressed came back to the front of his mind, and he finally understood.

Haunter's fear?

He stared down at his hands again.

"Recede, or I'll exorcise you, too."

The scintillating aura surrounding Ash faded and receded up his arms to settle in a cold shade on his shoulders. He looked up and saw Haunter, the same one that had possessed Jenny before, hovering over him. The Ghost grinned down at him.

Pikachu and Charmeleon finally came closer, but Charmeleon snarled at Haunter, wary.

"Okay, lady, you better tell me what the hell's going on."

Agatha narrowed her eyes, and the three Ghosts hovering just behind her twitched, sensing their master's irritation. Ash swallowed and took a step back.

"Because you're Imago, I'll do you a favor and pretend you didn't use that tone with me."

Ash let out a muffled cry of frustration and clenched his fists. "That word, I keep hearing it and I have no idea what it *means*."

Agatha gave him a withering look. "Imago is them." She gestured over her head at the looming Ghosts. "And Imago is you and me. We are reflections of them."

"What? What does that mean?"

"It means that when they look at you, they see themselves. Congratulations, boy," she sneered. "You're a Medium."

Ivy climbed two stairs at a time to the second floor with Umbreon and Houndour hot on her heels. Gary trailed behind a few steps with the slower Golduck. She roundhoused the door leading to the second floor at the top of the stairwell and burst into the room. There were empty office desks and cubicles separated by dividers from wall to wall, but there wasn't a soul in sight. The door to the stairwell leading to the third floor lay across the room.

"This way," Ivy said, taking off at a run once Gary joined her.

The doors here were unlocked, so they raced up to the next floor, only to find it, too, devoid of people and Pokémon. The dirge continued to sweep through the night, and outside the mist reached even this high up into the sky. Ivy glanced out a window as she ran across the third floor. It was impossible to see too far beyond it, but her skin crawled with the feeling of being watched. The fourth floor was empty as well, so they advanced to the fifth and Ivy knocked down the door. Immediately, she got blown back by a rank stench and a cloud of filth. Gagging, she stumbled into Gary, who caught her and landed against the stairwell's wall.

"Ugh," she groaned. "What the hell is that?"

The miasma rolled as gently as the mists outside, and within it something gurgled, lying in wait.

"We could really use Ash's Butterfree right about now," Gary said, covering his nose and mouth with a hand. "Can't believe I just said that."

"There's something in there," Ivy said, righting herself. "I'll go first and clear a path. I see it moving."

"What? Wait, Ivy—"

She dove in after Umbreon and Houndour with an arm over her face to block out as much of the stink as possible. It stung her eyes and they watered, but she managed well enough. Gary's shouts faded behind her, like the mist had swallowed her whole. Umbreon stayed close, yellow eyes glowing as it stalked, silent, while Houndour brought up the rear. She moved quickly but quietly, and the thing in the mist shivered as it lurched.

A Grimer?

Whatever it was, she'd take it out before Gary had to deal with it. Motioning to Umbreon, the black feline crept forward, silent as a wraith, and the yellow rings tattooed on its glossy hide began to glow with sinister light. Umbreon Snarled and struck the Grimer with dark energy. The sentient sludge exploded, and some of the grime splashed onto Ivy's armor. It smoked and seared, but the armor held sturdy and protected her from the poison.

"Gotcha," she said.

Houndour growled in warning, and Ivy whirled. More movement in the fog crept toward her, and she paled.

Four...seven...thirteen...

"...Shit."

A Sludge Bomb hurtled through the air toward her, and she jumped to the right to avoid it. A thick, gaseous cloud passed through her and shrieked. Writhing, the cloud took on a semi-solid form and bared rotted teeth in a cheshire grin. The Gengar burst out laughing, and its eyes glowed red.

"Umbreon!" she shouted as the wave of supernatural energy slammed into her.

The world erupted in shade and shadows, and that was when the screams started.

Gary fumbled through the dark with Golduck, squinting in search of

Ivy. He considered releasing Growlithe or Scyther, but they wouldn't be much use in the dark against otherworldly enemies. So he moved slowly and cautiously, trusting his other senses to alert him to danger. Golduck began to project crimson light as it powered up another Confusion attack, and Gary stopped to listen.

Laughter slithered among the rolling mists, and the stench became more intense.

"Get ready," he whispered to Golduck.

Something slushed nearer, and Gary held his breath, counting the seconds. When it was nearly upon them, he waved a hand.

"Now!"

Golduck released a Confusion wave, and a cerulean light penetrated the thick fog. Telekinetic energy slammed into the massive blob of sludge inching toward Gary and caught the flying Sludge Bomb in mid-air before it could hit him. Golduck's eyes widened and the psychic energy released, beating the Muk back and churning it into a thousand smaller drops of sludge. The fog parted somewhat, revealing the door on the other side leading to the stairs. It creaked on its hinges, and Gary sighed in relief.

"Come on," he said to Golduck before running toward the exit.

Ivy must already be upstairs.

The journey up was fast, and he panted from the adrenaline overdose and lack of rest. But Golduck kept up with him easily, and another Confusion attack ripped the door off its hinges.

"What the fuck was that?"

Gary wiped sweat and grime from his eyes and came face to face with two familiar foes and one he didn't recognize. He bared his teeth in disgust. "Jessie and James."

James squinted at him. "Hey, you look familiar. Have we threatened you before?"

"It's that punk kid we ran into on Route Twenty-Five!" Jessie went for a Pokéball at her hip. "Back for more, I see."

The one Gary didn't recognize pulled his black beret lower to hide

glacial eyes that matched his hair. "No one interferes with Chimera," he said softly. "Jessie, James. Kill him and take his Pokémon."

"Our pleasure, Proton," James said as he threw a Pokéball.

James's Victreebel materialized in a flash of light, followed by Jessie's Arbok and a round, squat Lickitung. Proton headed for the stairs on the other side of the floor at a sprint to get to the top floor.

"Stop him!"

Golduck fired off another Confusion attack and struck Proton as he fled. Blue energy lifted the Rocket Admin into the air and slammed him into the wall, where it dented on impact. Meanwhile, Gary reached for the Pokéballs at his belt and threw them. Nidoking, Scyther, and Growlithe appeared in a burst of white light, and Nidoking roared loud enough to wake the dead.

"Proton!" Jessie shrieked.

"I learned a few things since we last met," Gary said. "Fire Spin!"

Growlithe howled and conjured a thick vortex of fire that spun toward Victreebel.

"Nidoking, cover!"

"Poison Fang!" Jessie shouted.

Arbok slithered with shocking celerity toward Growlithe as Victreebel attempted to dodge the fiery attack, but Nidoking was there and caught the huge serpent in its bulky claws, taking the poisonous bite without even flinching. Lickitung shot its massive, rubbery tongue out and caught Nidoking around the leg.

"Fury Cutter!"

Scyther screeched and flew toward Lickitung, slashing its deadly saber arms and drawing blood. But Lickitung's tongue was tough and didn't sever. Nidoking roared and tossed Arbok with all its might, sending it hurtling against the far wall.

"Son of a bitch!" Jessie swore.

"I'm just getting started." Gary thrust his arm forward, and Golduck lunged.

Ivy coughed up blood as another spike slammed into her abdomen and flayed her liver.

It's not real. It's not real.

"You disobeyed me," a voice said above her.

The Masked Man hovered over her, frosty eyes condescending as he scrutinized her over his nose. Ivy grimaced and shut her eyes to his voyeuristic gaze that even now made her skin crawl and her heart race with foreboding.

"You're not real. I escaped you!"

The Masked Man laughed. "I threw you away like the trash you are. Don't delude yourself, Green."

Another spike plunged into her stomach, and she choked on the pain. She couldn't feel her legs anymore, and blood spewed from her mouth and fell back on her face in splotches.

"That's...not my...name."

"Oh, so you prefer the name that whore gave you? So disappointing. You never did amount to anything."

"Umbreon," she gasped. "H-Houndour..."

The Masked Man laughed and dribbled a syrupy, black tar from his mouth. It coated his lips, filling the cracks and dripped onto Ivy below him.

"They can't save you, little girl."

He reached for her with a disembodied hand that raked through her shredded abdomen and sent enervating bolts of pain to her very soul, to places deeper than any scar she carried reached. Her vision doubled, and his face warped. Blue eyes bled red, and his tar-stained incisors grew down the length of his chin.

It's not real.

"Yes, it is," he said in a hundred different voices all at once. "You're all alone in the dark, and in the darkness you'll stay."

The Masked Man's other hand reached for her face, and Ivy screamed.

"It's not *real*!"

Light flashed and washed out the ghostly hallucination, but it was gone in a flash and replaced by an ominous wave of tangible darkness that consumed both Ivy and the Ghost tormenting her. The pain in her stomach faded to a shadow of its former self, and she rolled over and wretched onto the tiled floor. The velvet darkness weighed her down, shielding her from whatever lay beyond for a few precious seconds, and she closed her eyes, shaking.

A terrible roar reverberated throughout the floor and stunned her to the bone. Wiping her mouth, she sat up and stared, wide-eyed, at the form of her savior. A towering figure stood on hind legs as tall as her chest, and its armored head towered twelve or thirteen feet above. Even in the pitch black, its glimmering, green scales pulsed with rivulets of dark energy all the way down its spiky tail, looking for an outlet. Umbreon and Houndour stood at its side, unafraid.

"Tyranitar," Ivy gasped.

The huge dinosaur clenched its meaty, front claws and roared again. The Gengar that had caught Ivy in its mirage cowered back in fear to join its comrades still hiding in the mist—two Ghastly, a Haunter, and another Gengar, along with the many Muk and Grimer still creeping about. Ivy got to her feet and put a shaky hand on Tyranitar's flank. It cast her a glance, and it took everything Ivy had not to recoil from its furious glower. But those eyes were familiar, ones she'd known for half her life, and she saw herself in them. Tyranitar cocked its head toward her and let its mouth hang open, revealing thick fangs dripping with dark energy.

The Ghosts were regrouping and possessing the venomous Muk and Grimer blobs, forcing them to amalgamate into one giant abomination.

"I don't dwell in darkness," Ivy said. "I *am* darkness." She pointed at the scrambling Ghosts as they prepared to defend with Shadow Balls and phantom winds. "Dark Pulse!"

Houndour, Umbreon, and Tyranitar exploded in a rush of night that swallowed the world whole.

Jenny and Fuji rested in the chairs near the fire while Ash and Agatha talked. Her Ghosts sneered down at him over her shoulders, and it was all he could do not to let their vacuous stares unnerve him. Haunter

had not left him alone, and its constant chill lingered at the back of his neck. Pikachu didn't try to climb up his arm to its usual perch with Haunter there.

"A Medium?"

"Medium, Imago, it's all the same. I've even been called a Necromancer in the past, as well, but we don't have the power to raise physical forms, only spiritual ones."

Ash ran his hands over the sides of his face. "I can't believe I'm hearing this."

"That makes two of us." She took a moment to size him up. "There's typically only one Medium in a generation. I've only ever heard stories of cases in the past when there was more than one."

"You mean... There's others?"

"Only a small handful. Ghosts are tricky beings that exist in the liminal spaces between day and night, the Here and There. They don't choose just anyone, and not just anyone chooses them."

"Wait, no, I didn't *choose* anything." He glared up at Haunter. "This thing almost killed Jenny."

Haunter put up its enlarged hands and waved them around, and Ash was flooded with a feeling of guilt. He gasped at the intensity of the emotion and put a hand on his chest, afraid his heart might pop out of his ribcage.

"I'll be damned," Agatha said. "This really is your first time. It's a miracle you're still standing."

"Enough with the cryptic BS! I just wanna know what's going on. I don't have time to sit around here when my friends're still out there!"

Agatha crossed her arms. "Very well. This place won't protect us for much longer, anyway, so I'll be brief. Minoru."

Fuji, who had recovered enough to sit up on his own now, nonetheless dabbed his forehead periodically with a handkerchief Jenny had given him. "Right, of course. I'm so embarrassed that you found me like this."

"Mr. Fuji," Jenny said. "No disrespect, but you'd be dead if we hadn't.

What happened?"

"The Ghosts, they're acting strangely. It's ever since that sad tune started playing at the Radio Tower. I did my best to seal off the House, give them peace, but I'm no Medium, so I couldn't do much."

"You did enough," Agatha said. "Besides, the ones outside stood no chance." She nodded to Haunter. "That one was either lucky or smart to stay in here and wait for you. Now it'll be immune to the radio waves."

"Radio waves?" Ash said.

Agatha pressed her lips together. "Don't you feel the song? It's taking some effort for me just standing here not to grow nauseous."

"The music did that? I remember I got a bad vibe from it outside, but..."

"That's because it's projecting a wavelength only Ghosts and those close to them can detect. Look at your Charmeleon and Pikachu. They seem perfectly fine, but Haunter was quick to possess the first corporeal body it could find. Humans and most other Pokémon can't detect the waves, so they can find some respite with them." Agatha shook her head. "But this wave is stronger than any I've ever heard. It's driving the Ghosts to madness, even the spirits of Pokémon and people long passed."

"That blob thing?"

"Ah, disturbed spirits of dead Pokémon buried here. You and Haunter dispelled them for now, but they'll be back unless we can stop the signal."

"I don't understand how anyone could do this," Fuji said. "To torment these poor souls and keep them from rest... It's a sin I cannot overlook."

Ash's eyes lingered on the Ghosts that floated over Agatha. "What are those?"

She followed his line of sight. "Good lord, you really know nothing. Those," she indicated the two grinning Ghosts identical to the one that had infected Ash with a horrific hallucination outside, "are called Gengar. They evolve from your friend, Haunter. And this one is Mismagius."

Mismagius let its mouth hang open, and a tar-like substance leaked from it like drool only to fade to nothing when it dripped past its stitched face. Ash withdrew the Pokédex from his pocket and scanned both species.

"That device," Agatha said. "Where did you get it?"

"Oh, this? It's a Pokédex."

"That's not what I asked, boy."

"You know, I have a name, *lady*. Ash Ketchum."

"Ash," Jenny hissed. "You can't talk to a member of the Elite Four like that."

Ash's jaw dropped. "A *what*? You're with the Elite Four?"

Agatha pinched the bridge of her aquiline nose and took a steadying breath. "Unbelievable." She glared up at Haunter. "You're absolutely certain?"

Haunter waved its hands around, and Ash was suddenly overwhelmed with glee. He laughed without meaning to, and immediately covered his mouth.

"*Control* yourself," Agatha scolded. "If you let the Ghost take over your emotions, it could consume you entirely. All right, for your sake, I'll explain a little. Listen carefully because this information could save your life. You're a Medium, or Imago, in the old tongue. Did you notice anything strange when Haunter possessed you?"

Ash looked at his hand and made a fist. "Yeah, it was like... Like I had Haunter's power. I could see it." He looked up. "I felt like I was floating."

Agatha nodded. "That's called Aura. Ghosts aren't from this plane, so they obey different natural laws than humans. Imago like you and me are predisposed to accepting them, and they can recognize that affinity in us." She indicated outside. "Non-Mediums can't take the physical and spiritual strain. Possession drains them of their life force, and the Ghosts consume them from the inside out until there's nothing but a useless husk leftover.

"But Ghosts can't survive long on this plane unless one of two conditions are met. Either they exist in a place like this, which is rife

with spiritual energy compounded over centuries, or they inhabit living beings that naturally exist on this plane. The former is obviously the safer and more permanent solution. The fact that they're possessing people despite this being hallowed ground is...upsetting."

"Wait," Ash said. "If I'm some Medium, like you're saying, why didn't I know this until now? I've never even seen a Ghost until tonight."

"That doesn't mean they didn't see you."

Laughter echoed in his head, and he glared up at Haunter. "Cut it out."

"It can't. This is your reality now. You and Haunter will be bonded forever, until you join it on the other plane one day. Of course, you'll live far longer than others your age with one foot on the other side. One of the...benefits of Mediumship. Other Tamers don't have that privilege."

"Tamers? So there's others?"

Ash's head was starting to hurt from the adrenaline rush of the night's events and Haunter's oppressive shadow overhead.

"Yes. Your connection with Ghosts gives you access to their powers for a limited amount of time. You can wound souls and defy the laws of gravity, like you experienced just now. And other Pokémon recognize your Aura, so they become more amenable to your direction. There's death in your bones, and they don't want to defy that right."

Ash's gaze fell to Charmeleon, who huffed like it knew what he was thinking.

"Death in my bones," Ash repeated. "Surge said that to me, too."

"The Vermilion Gym Leader?" Agatha chuckled. "I never liked Fulmen myself. Too brash and headstrong."

"Fulmen?"

"One with an affinity for Electric-type Pokémon."

Ash rubbed his mouth. "So you're saying there's something like what I have for every kind of Pokémon?"

"Of course. You didn't think you were special, did you?"

"I've never thought that."

She regarded him a moment. "There is a hierarchy. Just as Pokémon themselves have weaknesses and strengths, so, too, do Tamers. Not all trainers are Tamers, but those who are have to be wary of their shortcomings. Imagoexist in the realm of twilight, the in-between, so too much darkness or light can overwhelm you, just as it can overwhelm the Ghosts that haunt you."

Ash's mind raced with the implications of Agatha's revelations. His thoughts drifted to Misty. "Hey, what about someone who can hold their breath for like fifteen minutes?"

"That sounds like Syreni, a Water-type Tamer. The ones I know can hold their breaths for far longer than that, though."

Despite the situation, he couldn't help but grin. "That's incredible. And you just know when you meet one of these Tamers? How do you tell?"

"I've been around a long time, and I've seen much in my lifetime." She paused, thinking. "You're a novice Medium, so you may not see them until you develop a deeper bond with Haunter, but Tamers possess their own auras distinct from regular humans and Pokémon. That gives them away. It can be an invaluable advantage if you find yourself up against one you don't know."

Fuji cleared his throat and rose on shaky legs. "I don't mean to interrupt, but I think I've wasted enough time sitting idly by. This needs to end tonight."

"Yes," Agatha said. "I didn't come here to socialize. Officer Jenny."

Jenny stood up, and Growlithe and Parasect flanked her. "Ma'am."

"Minoru will require protection here. His talismans and warding spells should hold for now, but as long as that insidious tune keeps playing, I fear even the sacred grounds won't be enough to keep the Ghosts at bay."

Jenny nodded stiffly. "I'll be happy to stay and help here."

"Good, because there's much left to do," Fuji said. "I have to make sure there's a place for the Ghosts to go once they're free of this spell."

Agatha turned to Ash. "And you, you're with me. We're going to the Radio Tower and putting a stop to this mess."

"You don't have to tell me twice. You guys ready?" he asked

Charmeleon and Pikachu.

Pikachu sparked in anticipation of the battle ahead, and Charmeleon growled low in its throat. Overhead, Haunter cackled and channeled a chilling bloodlust through Ash's frame. He repressed a shiver and closed his eyes to blot it out.

"Good," Agatha said, eyeing him carefully. "You're a fast learner, if nothing else. Perhaps there's some hope for you yet."

Gary slammed against the wall to avoid Lickitung's resilient tongue, and seeing an opportunity, he jumped on it and held tight. James's Sandslash leaped toward him and prepared to Slash him to bits, but Golduck sprayed it with a Hydro Pump that sent the bristly shrew flying, and it crashed through a window just as James recalled it to its Pokéball.

"Cut it!" Gary shouted.

Scyther hacked and slashed with Fury Cutter, drawing smiley, red ribbons in Lickitung's tongue. Each cut went deeper as Fury Cutter powered up and honed Scyther's blades.

"Body Slam!" Jessie ordered.

Lickitung groaned and slammed its tongue on the floor, jostling Gary and knocking the wind out of him. The momentum launched the fubsy Pokémon into the air, where it angled in to crush Gary with its girth.

"Scyther!"

The green mantis flew and made a final cleave at the impossibly long tongue. And this time, its bladed arm severed the appendage completely. Lickitung cried in pain and lost its trajectory, raining blood on the floor, the battling Pokémon, and Gary before it finally landed on the floor with a sickening crack. It didn't get up again.

But Jessie didn't miss a beat, and as Gary got up and ordered Nidoking to Seismic Toss Arbok as hard as it could, something small and extremely fast flashed in front of him. It was gone so fast that the pain in his face took a couple seconds to manifest. Gary cried out as his face burned and bled, and he had to close his eyes to keep out the sting of blood. Something shook the building, like an earthquake, and a deep, feral roar echoed from below. The distraction was enough to give him a moment to wipe his eyes clean, and he looked around for

his lightning fast attacker. A lithe Meowth darted in between the larger Pokémon, searching for openings to do maximum damage undetected. Jessie threw back her head and laughed.

"Strength isn't always about having the biggest Pokémon around, chump!"

In the commotion, Proton had recovered and sluggishly crawled to the staircase. He locked the door behind him and disappeared, headed for the top floor where the creepy music was still playing.

Gary clutched his face, which was slashed to hell and still bleeding. Victreebel Screeched, disturbing all the people and Pokémon on the floor. Gary sank to one knee as the debilitating sound wave made his head spin.

"Kill that thing, Growlithe!"

Growlithe was woozy from the Screech attack, but it did its best to obey and took off at a run. Fire burst around its paws and enveloped it in a Flame Wheel as it charged straight for Victreebel. The pitcher plant Pokémon leaned forward and spat out globs of Acid that burned through the tiled floor where it made contact, forcing Growlithe to alter its path. Dark fumes rose from the holes the Acid created, having eaten through to the floor below.

"Stun Spore!" James commanded.

Victreebel belched out a cloud of shimmering, orange dust that surrounded it like a shield.

"Growlithe!"

But Growlithe had run too close and lost its balance as the spores arrested its movement. With a whimper, it fell through one of the holes in the floor and disappeared among the fumes. Before Gary could do anything about it, James threw another Pokéball and released a Tauros. The bull had been genetically altered, and violet sludge dripped from splotches in its hide and burned through the floor. Bones protruded from the grime, and the animal's mouth hung open as it gasped for breath.

"Kill him," James ordered.

The Tauros aberration stomped the floor and took off at a charge.

"Megahorn!"

Nidoking bellowed and ran to intercept the charging abomination. They clashed, and black sludge sloughed over Nidoking's face and shoulders. But the armored rodent pushed through and launched Tauros into the air, where it rained poison down and forced Jessie and James to retreat to safety.

"Hydro Pump!"

Anticipating Arbok's intervention, Golduck sprayed the massive snake just as it was about to ram Nidoking mid-attack and sent it flying straight for Jessie and James. Tauros crashed to the floor, cracking the already unstable foundation with a tremor. The dreadful roar Gary had heard before resounded again, louder now that there was less of a division between the floors, and he ran toward his Pokémon. Something was down there, and if Ivy was still stuck...

"Return!"

He recalled Scyther and Nidoking just as the windows, which had taken too much abuse from the battle, burst and let in the howling fog and the things that dwelled within it. Sentient shadows dove for the struggling Tauros, as well as Jessie's and James's Pokémon, forcing them to recall them.

"Golduck!"

The blue duck loped toward Gary, but before it could reach him the floor gave out underfoot, and he slipped through falling glass and cement. He opened his mouth to scream, but something heavy slammed into his chest. He didn't even remember hitting the ground.

Ash followed Agatha, who moved with surprising agility, among the tombstones. Charmeleon and Pikachu tailed them closely, while Haunter floated just over Ash's shoulders, buzzing with excitement and a little fear for what lay ahead. The infernal melody still played, and Agatha's three Ghosts shied from its effects by sinking deeper within her.

"We need to move faster," Agatha said. "See if you can keep up."

The two Gengar and Mismagius grinned back at Ash before melting into Agatha and enveloping her in a baleful glow. Agatha leaped forward thirty feet in one step, light as a feather.

"Okay, then," Ash said. He recalled Charmeleon and held out a hand for Pikachu. "It's okay, buddy. It's just me."

Pikachu hesitated.

"C'mon, Pikachu. We have to help Gary and Ivy. Haunter...just wants to help. Right?"

The Ghost grinned and pulsed with glee. Ash bit back a smile that wasn't his and gestured to Pikachu.

"Just for a bit, okay?"

Pikachu relented and crawled into Ash's arms, visibly uncomfortable.

"Okay, you," Ash said. "Get us to the Radio Tower as fast as you can."

Haunter sank back within Ash, happy to escape the lilting melody emanating from the Radio Tower, and immediately Ash was filled with a sense of weightlessness. He sucked in a breath and swallowed the nausea that bubbled in his stomach. Pikachu shivered in his arms, which were now coated in translucent ectoplasm. Agatha had disappeared up ahead, but Haunter's Aura tracked her movements. She appeared bright and violet against the blanket of night even through the heavy fog.

"Here goes nothing."

Ash ran, and the spectral Aura carried him far and fast. He soared over twenty feet of graveyard before he touched down for another step. Pikachu squeaked in his arms and sparked. In his head, Haunter laughed and laughed. A feeling of nostalgia coursed through Ash's veins, like the Ghost had been waiting so long for this moment and for Ash himself.

In no time at all, he caught up to Agatha just as she stopped in front of the Radio Tower. Zombified people and a couple Pokémon ambled around outside it.

"There's so many of them," Ash said, counting the possessed people.

"We don't have time to deal with them. The Ghosts are just doing what they can to suppress their madness. Our true target is the broadcast. Take my hand."

"Huh? What for?"

She scowled. "You're a novice. You can't make the jump alone."

She grabbed his hand before he could protest, and Ash instinctively tightened his hold on Pikachu. Agatha leaped from the ground, and Ash had no choice but to jump after her.

"Holy crap!"

The ground fell away and the mists with it. Haunter struggled to lift him, but Agatha had him by the wrist and pulled him along effortlessly. As they flew up, the Radio Tower's floors rushed past them, and Ash recoiled from the fifth floor's stench. A rancid fog burst through the windows, totally obscuring whatever lay inside. They rushed past it and landed on the roof, where Ash stumbled and rolled a few times. When he pushed himself up, his elbows wobbled and failed him the first try. Pikachu crouched near his face and squeaked in concern.

"Get up." Agatha held out a pale hand for him to take. "We need to hurry—"

The tower shook violently, and Agatha lost her balance. Ash dove to break her fall, and when the tremor receded, wailing permeated the air. A cold rush of fear shot down his spine as Haunter cowered within him.

"What was that?"

Agatha sat up and clutched her head. "You said you had friends here? Let's hope that was their doing and not the culprits responsible for this disaster."

Ash struggled to his feet and helped Agatha stand.

"Listen, boy."

"Ash."

Agatha narrowed her eyes, and the crows feet at their edges deepened. "Ash. Haunter is only as strong as the bond you have with it. Remember, Ghosts don't exist naturally on this plane. You're its tether, and it's through that connection that it can fight and protect you."

"Okay, but why the pep talk all of a sudden?"

She gazed toward the undulating fog that rose on all sides of the

tower. "In case I'm not there to help you make the jump next time."

Ash set his jaw and looked down at Pikachu. Haunter's Aura illuminated the tiny rodent in a bright, golden light. He smirked. "I think I'll be okay."

"Good. Let's go."

He followed Agatha through the roof access door, which her Gengar rammed with a Shadow Claw and tore asunder. They descended a dark staircase and came to another door, beyond which voices could be heard. Agatha didn't wait and marched through the room.

"What the— You can't be here!"

A man in a black, spandex suit confronted them and tossed a Pokéball. A hulking, elephant-like Pokémon emerged, but there was something off about it. Electric sparks danced across its back where two Voltorb were implanted in its armored hide.

"What is this?" Agatha said as she took in the aberrant Pokémon.

"Hold on, Shen," said a man in black with frosty eyes and an angular face sharp enough to cut through solid rock. "That's Agatha of the Elite Four. You won't stand a chance."

"So you recognize me," Agatha said. "Then I presume you know why I'm here."

The man in charge chuckled. He was leaning over a wide piece of machinery that blinked with glowing buttons and switches.

That has to be the thing controlling the broadcast, Ash thought to himself.

Haunter's cold presence within him shuddered with black hatred, and Ash nearly lost his balance under the force of the emotion.

"Unfortunately, I can't let you interfere with Chimera."

"Proton," Shen said. "I can take 'em out. Get outta here."

Ash quickly scanned Shen's Pokémon with the Pokédex. The article on Donphan was lengthy, but its Ground typing was all Ash needed to know.

"Chimera?" Agatha said.

Proton smirked. "Team Rocket's greatest achievement to date. And this," he gestured to Lavender Town outside, "is our latest iteration of the technology. Isn't it magnificent? Now we can broadcast Team Rocket's will to Pokémon for miles around!"

Ash trembled with fury. "Fuck you. Chimera's just a front for your twisted experiments. How many Pokémon have you killed? How many people?"

"I don't know. How many lives does it take to achieve the next stage of evolution?"

"Let's see how you like it, then. Wartortle!"

He tossed Wartortle's Pokéball, and the blue turtle shot a jet of water at the Donphan.

Agatha leaped to the other side of the room and slashed at Proton himself, but he tossed out two Pokéballs and revealed a hulking Ursaring and a Piloswine, the latter of which blasted Agatha with an ice bolt. Gengar protected her, but she fell back and Ursaring ran after her, fists flying.

"Thunderbolt!"

Pikachu erupted in lightning that caught on the trail of water Wartortle had created. Sparks danced along the floor and slammed into Donphan. The elephant honked in pain and lowered its head to charge. Wartortle was smaller, though, and Rapid Spun out of the way. Ash himself dove after Shen and made a swipe for him. Haunter rose up over him and extended Ash's reach by two feet with a phantom claw.

"Holy—!"

Haunter ripped through him with a Shadow Claw and came away trailing a milky, white smoke. Shen seized and fell to the floor. Drool dribbled from his mouth as he curled in on himself, eyes dilated, and leaking the milky substance from unseen wounds.

An Icy Wind tore through the air and slammed into Ash and his Pokémon, sending him tumbling head over heels backward into the wall. Ice crystals formed on his lips, and his fingers turned blue. Haunter shivered within him, and he struggled to stand against the freezing cold.

"Pikachu!"

The yellow rodent ran at Donphan and dove in for a Quick Attack.

"Self-Destruct!" Proton shouted across the room.

"No!"

The Voltorb on Donphan's back glowed bright with white light, and Ash lunged for Pikachu.

Stygian energy pulsed in the air as Ivy stood next to Tyranitar, Umbreon and Houndour flanking her sides. She peered through the darkness for signs of movement. Tyranitar growled low beside her, a death rattle that carried throughout this suffocating space. She heard nothing but the *slurp, slurp, slurp*ing of the Muk and Grimer still lurking about, but the Ghosts had disappeared or gone into hiding.

"You can't hide in the dark from me," she said, peering left and right.

She raised a hand, ready to command her Pokémon, but something heavy crashed overhead and froze the blood in her veins.

Gary.

"We have to get up there. Tyranitar."

The hefty dinosaur lowered its head so its large, yellow eye was level with Ivy's. She smiled and reached out to trace its muzzle.

"Feel like breaking something?"

The beginnings of a growl rumbled deep in its belly, and Ivy backed away.

"There." She pointed directly overhead. "Get us outta here."

Tyranitar reared up to its full, frightening height and took a deep breath. With a thunderous roar, it powered up a massive Hyper Beam and lit up the entire floor. The orange light collided with the edges of the oppressive fog clogging this place and bounced back. The Ghosts hiding in the mists screamed and flew around the room, desperate. Tyranitar's taloned feet crushed the tiling underfoot and it sank into the cement as it powered the Hyper Beam.

"Almost there!" Ivy said, covering her ears. "Just a little more!"

The Ghosts rushed at her with wandering Shadow Claws, dragging the toxic Grimer and Muk with them, anything to hurl at Ivy.

"Flamethrower!"

Houndour leaped into the air and spewed molten fire that burned the advancing blobs to nothing but smoking piles of tar. The fog cracked as the Ghosts' power waned.

"Umbreon, help him out!"

Umbreon quivered and shook off a wave of dark energy that blasted the Ghosts back from rushing their group. With one final clamor, Tyranitar burst through the spectral trap keeping them in this place and the fog shattered like glass as the Hyper Beam made contact with the ceiling. Cement and metal cracked and burst as the ceiling came apart, and Tyranitar powered down its attack. A fat Arbok screeched as it plummeted to the ground from the floor above, followed by chunks of concrete and glass and an orange canine Ivy recognized as Gary's Growlithe. She sprinted to catch it before it could get crushed under the debris, and together they rolled across the floor. A flash of blue hovered directly above—Gary's Golduck. Confusion slammed into some of the falling debris, but it missed its target.

"Gary!"

Tyranitar snatched up Ivy, Houndour, and Umbreon and doubled over them to shield them from the deadly cave in just as Ivy saw Gary get slammed by a jagged hunk of concrete and disappear beneath it.

"No!" she screamed under Tyranitar's adamantine frame.

The collapse ended and Tyranitar pushed itself up on its hind legs, dropping slabs of concrete and pieces of metal two-by-four off its back like they were nothing but packing peanuts. Ivy let Growlithe go and followed the pup over the debris toward Golduck. It had managed to save itself and floated, suspended telepathically over the jagged rubble.

"Where'd he fall?" she demanded of the lithe swimmer.

Golduck fixed her with a vacuous stare, and Ivy trembled with anger. Careless of the dangers of Golduck's Psychic barrier, she lunged and slugged it in the face. The blue barrier flickered as Golduck staggered and shook its head out.

"*Where*?"

Rocks began to glow with psychic energy several feet away and slowly rise from the ground. A hand appeared among the rubble, and Ivy climbed as quickly as she could toward it.

"Tyranitar! Dig him out!"

Ivy didn't wait and began pulling back the smaller debris, anything she could physically lift. Tyranitar lumbered to her side and hefted one of the larger chunks of concrete and tossed it to the side, where it crashed through a window and fell to the ground outside. Growlithe whined by her side and pawed at the ground. With Golduck's and Tyranitar's help, she soon uncovered Gary, who was bleeding from the face and almost unrecognizable. Warm blood leaked from puncture wounds in his armor, and his arm was bent at an unnatural angle. He wasn't moving.

"Shit."

She shrugged her pack off as Golduck wandered closer to examine its fallen trainer. Growlithe continued to whine and paced up and down Gary's side, nudging him periodically. Behind her, whoever Gary had been fighting dug themselves out of the rubble and began to regroup.

"Jessie, are you okay?" James said, digging his partner out of the debris.

She hissed. "My leg. I think it's broken."

"Come on, Gary, hold on for me," Ivy said as she rummaged around her pack. "Damnit, where is it!"

Tears blurred her vision, and she cut her hand on something sharp. For one dreadful second, she was sure the vial she was looking for had shattered, but it turned out to be one of the Antidotes Misty had packed for them that they hadn't used yet. The Max Potion was all the way at the bottom of her bag, and she yanked it out and tore the top off with her teeth.

Gary was bleeding from his mouth and unresponsive when she made him sit up.

"C'mon, you have to drink this," she said, nudging the Potion toward his lips. "Gary, c'mon."

There was no response.

"Shit, it's the girl who stabbed me," Jessie hissed. "James, I want her *dead*."

"We have to get you help. She can wait."

"Fuck that. Arbok!"

The colossal cobra, though bleeding from the tumble it had taken in the collapse, hissed and slithered toward Ivy and Gary.

"You're drinking this if I have to force you." Ivy opened Gary's mouth and dumped the entire contents of the Max Potion down his throat. She rubbed his throat to make him swallow it, and some of it leaked from the sides of his mouth. There was still no response, and she detected no heartbeat.

"No," she said through gritted teeth. "No, no, no! Gary, wake up!"

Arbok spat gelatinous venom at Ivy, and she spun just in time to see it. Houndour leaped up to block it and got sprayed with poison. The black canine yelped and crashed among the debris. Growlithe bounded after it.

"Houndour!"

"Surprise!" Jessie said, standing despite her ruined leg. "Kill her, Arbok!"

Ivy could barely see straight with her tears falling freely. "Hyper Beam!"

Tyranitar jumped from the rubble where Gary still lay and fired off another orange beam of light. Arbok was still fast despite its injuries, though, and dodged the worst of the attack. Jessie laughed, and the snake once again zeroed in on Ivy.

A rush of wind was the only warning before a grey streak flew in through one of the shattered windows and sank two-inch bone talons into Arbok's tough hide, piercing through the tightly-packed scales. Aerodactyl squawked and lifted Arbok off the ground enough to drag it, writhing and hissing in pain, across the dilapidated room and sent it crashing toward Jessie and James. Hunks of bleeding flesh and bone came away in Aerodactyl's talons as it ripped free of the snake and circled back.

"The only ones who'll die here're you two!"

James tossed out a Pokéball and a huge Pidgeot materialized from the light. It squawked and spread its massive wings. "How about a rain check on that?"

"How about *not*. Umbreon, aim for the bird!"

Umbreon took off running, but something just as fast tackled it from the side. A light-footed Meowth hissed and pounced after the larger feline.

"Dark Pulse!"

Tyranitar roared and sent a wave of black energy in all directions. It slammed into the Meowth and sent it flying into James as he attempted to get Jessie onto Pidgeot's back. Umbreon, immune to the wave's effects, bounded after the retreating Rockets and leaped into the air. Its tail fur stood on end and hardened to steel spikes as it came down on Pidgeot with Iron Tail. Jessie swung around at it with piece of sawed off pipe, forcing Umbreon to redirect its attack and slice through the metal. Aerodactyl reappeared through the window for another round with Arbok, but Jessie recalled the big snake along with Meowth. James hauled her up onto Pidgeot's back just as Aerodactyl passed over them.

"No you don't!"

Ivy ran after them herself, but just as they were about to take off, the top floor exploded and more debris rained down on them. Ivy ducked to protect her head, but her thoughts immediately shifted to Gary lying exposed.

"Gary!"

A heavy slab of concrete struck her in the back as she struggled to get back to him, and she tripped. Tyranitar was at her side in an instant and covered her from further abuse. The collapse was shorter this time, and as soon as it was safe, Ivy crawled out from under Tyranitar to get to Gary, who was covered in debris and dust. But before Ivy could get close, the rubble moved and burst free. Aerodactyl rose and shook out its wings, which had shielded Gary from the worst of the rock slide. The grey reptile squawked angrily and nudged Gary with its muzzle.

Careless of Team Rocket, Ivy scrambled back over the debris to get to

Gary. Aerodactyl made room for her, and she took Gary's face in her hands. His eyes remained closed even as the Max Potion stitched together the surface wounds on his face. Hot tears plopped onto his dirty cheeks as she hovered over him, trembling.

"Gary," she sobbed. "Please, you can't die on me. You just can't, okay?"

Golduck and Aerodactyl hovered over them, curious and perhaps sensing the hopelessness of the situation. Ivy shook as the sobs intensified and racked her body. She leaned forward and touched her forehead to Gary's, careless of the tears that drowned them both.

"Please...I can't lose you."

Something rough but warm slid up her cheeks and caught her tears.

"You haven't."

Ivy sucked in a breath and opened her eyes, and all she saw was a dazzling green that filled her sight, sound, and touch. Chapped thumbs smeared the tear tracks on her cheeks.

"Gary?"

He was so close, warm. Alive. She trembled with a fresh batch of tears and slid her arms around his neck in a bone-crushing hug.

"Oh my god," she sobbed into his shoulder. "You're alive."

His arms wrapped around her back and held her close, albeit weakly. His breathing was labored and hot against her tangled hair.

"Can't get rid of me so easy."

Ivy smiled and choked on a laugh. She pulled back a little and ran her thumb over the tender tracks along his skin where Meowth had Slashed him. "Damn idiot. You can't just go falling through ceilings."

His hand trailed up her back and he wove long fingers through her hair. Ivy's smile faded a little as she held his gaze. This close, his short breaths washed over her lips.

"Pesky woman," he said.

A heavy weight settled on her shoulders as she looked down at him and he tugged gently on her hair. The urge to fall, to let gravity win, crossed her mind as she held his gaze, timeless green.

Jessie and James's Pidgeot squawked from across the devastated room. It had escaped the worst of the second blast, and the Rocket Grunts were attempting to escape with it. Pidgeot spread its massive wings and flapped hard enough to kick up a tornado of debris. Ivy shielded her eyes.

"They're getting away!"

"To be continued!" James shouted over the wind.

Pidgeot shot like a bullet for the opposite window, but a bolt of lightning arced through the air after it.

"Stop them!"

A jet of water shot after Pidgeot, but the agile bird was as fast as it was robust and angled to avoid it. James ducked Jessie's head down as they crashed through glass and flew off into the lightening sky.

"Cowards!"

"Ash," Gary said, sitting upright again. "You're okay."

Ash stood a few yards away atop the rubble with Pikachu and Wartortle. When he saw Gary and her, he grinned. "Looks like a I missed a hell of a party here."

The Self-Destruct attack crushed everything in the vicinity, including the floor and the machine broadcasting the sinister music. Glass shattered over Ash and the floor fell away as he curled in on himself. His breath came in shallow, sucking bursts.

A banshee-like screech stirred him, and he looked up to see Agatha command Mismagius forward to possess Proton. The Ursaring jumped to protect its master and collided with Mismagius. Ursaring jerked unnaturally and its spine bent back forty-five degrees. Spidery, purple veins rose and burst through its hide, spilling blood, and it roared in agony.

Something squeaked in Ash's arms, and he looked down to see Pikachu, relatively unharmed and enveloped in soft, violet light. Ash shook, still not fully recovered from the explosion, but a feeling of relief swept through him.

"Haunter..."

The Ghost's spectral Aura glowed around him, fainter than before. Ash sniffled and hugged Pikachu closer.

"Thank you."

Wartortle emerged from its shell several yards away, completely unharmed if not a little scuffed up, and waddled over to Ash. There was a gaping hole in the floor where the explosion had gone off, and there was no sign of Donphan. Insulation and pieces of piping fell from the crumbling hole, and Ash looked over the edge.

"Aagh!"

Proton crashed against some of the destroyed machinery. Agatha hovered above ground like an angel of death come to pass judgment on him. His Ursaring lay mutilated in a corner, and Piloswine convulsed as a Gengar devoured it from the inside out, laughing all the while.

"Your machine's destroyed. My job here is done."

Proton panted and reached for the last Pokéball at his belt and something else Ash couldn't make out. "You got it all wrong. Joke's on you guys, you old bitch."

Agatha waved a hand, but Proton tossed both the Pokéball and the black object in his hand at Agatha before she could send her ravenous Gengar after him. The ball exploded in a thick cloud of peppery dust, and she recoiled, gagging. The wind picked up and a Fearow crashed through the remaining, high-vaulted windows with Proton on its back. The mists from outside poured in and cleared away the pepper bomb. Ash was more concerned with what lay at his feet, though. The entire sixth floor was gone, and as the dust cleared he could make out some people and Pokémon moving around. His heart leaped in his chest.

"Agatha!"

"I see it."

Ash looked back out at Proton flying away into the west. "Damnit, he's getting away!"

"Leave him. Let's get down there." She leaped over the edge and disappeared into the writhing abyss below.

"Right behind you."

Ash scooped up Pikachu and Wartortle before they could get squeamish about Haunter's presence and jumped. The Ghost's chilling Aura flared to life all around him, and it used the last vestiges of its spare energy to guide Ash safely to the ground, where he landed lightly and released Pikachu and Wartortle.

A Pidgeot zoomed by and kicked up a mean gale behind it. Ash recognized the two riders as the Rocket Agents that ambushed him at Mt. Moon and didn't hesitate.

"Thunderbolt!"

Pikachu erupted in bright light that zigzagged toward the fleeing Pidgeot, but it missed its target narrowly. Ash shook with anger.

"Stop them!"

Wartortle sprayed a thick column of water after Pidgeot, but the bird again swerved elegantly out of the way and crashed through the broken windows.

"Let them leave," Agatha said as she touched down next to him. "They'll rue the day."

"You're damn right they will."

"Ash," a familiar voice called to him. "You're okay."

Across the room, Gary and Ivy sat atop a mountain of rubble and stared at him like they'd seen a Ghost. Haunter cackled at the whimsical thought, and Ash cracked a grin.

"Looks like I missed a hell of a party here."

Ivy helped Gary stand, and Golduck and Aerodactyl crawled next to him. Ash scanned the area, and his eyes settled on the gigantic dinosaur-like Pokémon he didn't recognize.

"Whoa, that's new."

Ivy and Gary regrouped slowly, and he went to them.

"Oh, Houndour..." Ivy kneeled down next to Growlithe and examined Houndour a moment. "Poison. Damnit."

She recalled the brave canine to its Pokéball, and Growlithe bounded back to Gary and leaped into his arms, nearly knocking him over.

"Whoa, hey boy." Gary cracked a smile and scratched Growlithe behind the ears. The exuberant canine slobbered his face with its pink tongue. "Good job back there."

Ash's approach got cut off when the behemoth Pokémon growled and positioned itself in his path.

"Get back!" Agatha drifted to his side and yanked him back by the arm. "That's a Tyranitar, a most fearsome Dark Pokémon. Don't touch it."

Ivy had a hand on Tyranitar's flank and walked around it. Umbreon was at her side and hissed when it got a whiff of Ash and Agatha.

"Messor!" Agatha pulled Ash back, and he stumbled after her.

"What? Hey, let go," Ash said, trying to get out of her surprisingly painful grip. "Those're my friends!"

Gary drew up next to Ivy and leaned on her for support. "What's going on? Ash, who's this?"

Agatha paled as she stared between Ivy and Gary. "No, it can't be..."

Ash walked around to stand in front of Agatha and clutched her arms. He glared up at the Ghosts that hovered over her with as much confidence as he could muster. "Calm down. What's the problem?"

Agatha swallowed and blinked, the spell of whatever had arrested her attention breaking. The chilly façade was back in place. "You there," she said to Gary. "Oak."

Ash frowned and looked back at Gary and Ivy. "You know her?"

Gary shook his head. "Never seen her before."

"I'd know that face anywhere," Agatha said. "You're the spitting image of Sam. His grandson, perhaps?"

Gary stiffened. "That's right. Professor Samuel Oak's my grandfather. You know him?"

Agatha took her time responding. Her gaze softened in a way Ash hadn't seen before. "Once."

"What did you call me?" Ivy said.

She had a hand on the knife at her thigh as she stared down Ash and Agatha. Pikachu squeaked and hopped closer to Gary and her, but looked back at Ash questioningly.

Agatha sucked in a shaky breath. "Unbelievable. I've never heard of such a thing."

"I asked you a question," Ivy snapped.

Ash approached his friends again and put up his hands in a placating gesture. "Whoa, hey, you don't wanna be rude to her, trust me, okay?"

"Why?" Gary asked. "Who is she?"

"Well..."

"Messor," Agatha said. "To think you cavort so easily..." Her piercing eyes shifted to Gary. "And *you*. What could Sam be thinking letting a Delphi anywhere near these two?"

Gary stepped forward on shaky legs. "Listen, lady. I dunno who you are, but you don't get to come in here and act like you know us."

Ash put his hands up to silence both sides. "Okay, enough! Guys, this is Agatha of the Elite Four. She helped me out a *ton*."

The shift in the air was almost palpable, and Haunter delighted in the tension. Ash covered his mouth to stop himself from giggling like mad and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Get out, the signal's gone," he said.

Haunter begrudgingly did as it was asked.

"Shit," Ivy backed up and dragged Gary with her as she eyed the Ghost. "Ash, what the *hell* is going on?"

Haunter grinned down at them, and whispers crawled in Ash's ear. He rubbed his ears and glared up at the Ghost. "Cut it *out*. You got a death wish?"

Haunter found that notion hilariously ironic and threw back its head in a cackle.

"Ash," Gary said, doing his best to remain calm. "Explain. *Now*."

Agatha stepped forward. "Yes, please explain how a Medium, a

Clairvoyant, and a *Reaper*, of all the abominable things, ended up here together."

Ash rubbed his temples, and Haunter mimicked the motion overhead, highly amused. "Okay, yeah, explain. Can we go somewhere that's not falling apart first?"

Day broke, and with the fleeting twilight the Ghosts that had sought shelter from Team Rocket's Chimera wave relinquished their holds over people and Pokémon to retreat to the sacred ground at the House of Memories. Fuji, with Jenny's help, had fixed up the three shines around the House so the Ghosts had a beacon to follow. There were no further signs of the disturbed phantasms risen from graves of people and Pokémon long since passed. The sun rose, and the tranquility Lavender Town was known for rose with it.

All was not well. Bodies in various states of decay and mutilation littered the streets. Those that survived the mass possession were weak and bedridden at best, in critical condition and dying from their many wounds at worst. The local clinic was filled beyond capacity, and the nurses who had finally emerged from under lock and key in their homes remained on their feet for the next fifteen hours straight.

But Lavender had survived, somehow. People braved the new day, determined to recover and rebuild. The trio was no different as they sat by a roaring fireplace in the House of Memories with Agatha and Fuji.

"I wanna start at the beginning," Gary said. He held a scalding cup of tea between his bandaged hands. "How do you know Gramps?"

Agatha studied him for a moment before responding slowly. "We were close once."

"How close?"

She chuckled. "You may be the spitting image of him at your age, but your attitude's all wrong." She sipped her tea despite the heat. "Ash is much closer to him in temperament."

"Really?" Ash said, smiling a little.

"It sounds like you were very close," Gary continued, ignoring the comment. "Why hasn't he ever mentioned you?"

Agatha set her tea down on the table. "There are many things I'm sure he hasn't mentioned. That Pokédex, for example. I bet he never told you how that idea started."

"He wanted to catalogue all the Pokémon in Kanto and Johto for research purposes."

"I can't decide if you're trying to convince me or yourself."

Gary pressed his lips together, but Ivy put a hand on his shoulder before he could say something he would regret.

"How about you get to the point?" she said. "We don't exactly have the luxury of time here when Jenny's working hard to help people get back on their feet. We promised we'd help her when we were through here."

Agatha glowered. "How like Messor to speak out of turn and so bluntly."

"That word again. You also called me a Reaper, if I remember. I'm just *dying* to hear why."

"Agatha," Ash said, tentative. "Are they Tamers, too? Can you see that aura thing?"

Agatha's expression softened just a little as she glanced at Ash. "That's correct. This one," she pointed to Ivy, "has an aura as dark as night. She's Messor, a Dark element master. And the young Oak is the opposite." She addressed Gary directly. "Your aura is pure and white. There's no mistake, you're as Clairvoyant as the strongest Psychic Pokémon. A Delphi like Sam."

"What the hell is a Tamer?" Ivy asked.

"It's like a person with a special affinity with a certain Pokémon element," Ash said. "Agatha explained all this to me earlier. I'm a Medium, so that's why Haunter's following me around. Uh, right, we have a Haunter now. Pretty cool, right?"

Gary and Ivy said nothing as they glared at him. Ash pulled his hat off and fiddled with the brim.

"Hah, right... Anyway, apparently Surge is a Fulmen, and Misty's a Syreni." He paused for a moment before adding, "You know, I bet Brock's one, too. I should ask him next time we see him."

"So you're saying we each have some kind of affinity for an element?" Gary said. "But you and I train all different types. I get Ivy, but it doesn't make sense for us. I don't even have any Psychic-type Pokémon."

"Apparently that doesn't matter," Ash said. "It's just part of us, and she can see it in our auras. I can't see them yet, but maybe one day."

"What I fail to understand," Agatha said, "is how a Clairvoyant, a Reaper, and a Medium can coexist the way you three do. It defies natural law. You shouldn't be able to breathe the same air, let alone be *friends*. Especially a Clairvoyant and a Reaper. You're polar opposites, natural enemies."

"Maybe I like his personality," Ivy sneered.

"Insolent girl. You don't want to anger me."

Ivy handed Gary her tea to stand up and he was forced to take it or let it spill. "And you don't want to anger *me*."

Agatha rose as well, and they stared each other down. Ash was up and in between them in a flash. "Okay, okay, simmer down, everybody."

"She's provoking me," Ivy said. "Don't pretend like this isn't all super shady."

"Hello, *Elite Four*, Ivy. I think we all know we got bigger fish to fry, if you get my drift."

Ivy crossed her arms and sat back down. "Whatever."

Agatha looked between the three of them again and frowned. "So that's it. Did you know the whole time?"

Ash gave her a weird look. "Huh? Did who know what?"

Agatha shook her head. "Sam gave you all Pokédexes, so he must have known what you were. But he let you run off together, anyway." She scowled. "He always was so damn optimistic." She sat back down and looked pointedly at Ash. "You're the bridge. The twilight to their night and day." She pointed at Gary and Ivy. "*You* are why Sam was alright with this ludicrous arrangement. I mean, a Clairvoyant and a Medium together are one thing, but a Reaper? Out of the question."

"You know, you never did answer my question about how you know

Gramps so well," Gary said. "You said he's a Clairvoyant like me, right? And you're a Medium. Wanna tells us about that?"

"I'll say this, you inherited his cheek. But if Sam hasn't told you anything, then it's not my place to say. Suffice it to say we've known each other nearly all our lives. The rest, I'll leave to him to explain if the fancy strikes him."

They arrived at an impasse, and everyone brooded over their too-hot tea. Fuji stood up to stoke the fire.

"As much as I enjoy having company, you're all adding quite a bit of negative energy to this place. Kindly calm down a bit, would you?"

"I'm *calm*," Ivy whispered when Gary stepped on her foot.

They stared each other down before Ivy backed off and pulled her knees up and crossed them on the couch.

"Anyway," Gary said. "Changing the subject, you're an Elite Four. We've actually been traveling around with the hope that you guys would eventually notice what we're doing."

"What's that? Getting yourselves nearly killed?"

"No," Ash said quickly before Gary could say something nasty. "Actually, we're going to the different Gyms and asking for their backing against Team Rocket. I guess we don't have to explain why we think they're up to no good after everything you saw here."

Agatha made a sour face. "No, I received the message loudly and clearly, as you young people like to say. Team Rocket needs to be stopped."

"So you'll help us?" Ivy blurted out. "I mean, the cause. Look, I don't really care what you think about me or whatever, but we're trying to stop Team Rocket before Chimera gets out of hand."

"I believe we're well past that point," Agatha said. "Anyway, after what happened here in Lavender, I don't need further convincing. I'll report this back to my colleagues as soon as I get back to Indigo Plateau."

"Really? You'll do that?"

"Did I stutter?"

"So does this mean we're done?" Ash asked. "I mean, if the Elite Four's

gonna get involved, that's the best result, right?"

Gary leaned forward on his knees and steepled his hands. "No, I don't think that's a good move. We should still visit the other Gyms. The Elite Four has a lot of power, but they don't actually have autonomy over the Gyms. They can influence, but they can't control."

"Hmph. I'm relieved to see Sam's at least been smart about your education," Agatha said.

"But since you're one of the Elite Four, your word would go a long way," Gary added. "So if you'd be so *kind*."

She waved him off. "Team Rocket never sat well with me. They attempted to buy us off in the past, but we didn't see things their way. I'm sure my colleagues will be happy to name them a public enemy once I report back."

"Wow," Ivy said. "It's almost like a dream. I can't believe we're really making a difference."

Ash laughed. "You didn't think we would?"

"You guys haven't been shy about reminding me I didn't plan this out very well. I guess... I dunno, it just seems too good to be true. Team Rocket's really going down."

"As long as we're breathing, they won't see a day of peace," Gary said.

Agatha stood up. "I can see you three are committed. Fine, I won't stand in your way. But I caution you. The Gym Leaders are not to be trifled with. They're all Tamers, as you may have discovered by now. Don't take them lightly."

"Yeah, we got that part," Ash said.

Agatha turned to him. "And you, Ash Ketchum. The next time I see you, I expect you to have mastered your Imago abilities. That goes for you, too, Haunter."

The Ghost emerged from Ash's back in a billowing plume of violet smoke and grinned. Agatha nodded to it.

"Well, Minoru, my job here is done. You can handle maintenance from here."

Fuji bowed low to her. "My Lady, as always, I am in your debt."

"Gratitude is for favors, not duties owed."

"Won't you visit the shrine before you leave?"

"No. I've had quite enough of this town to last me another fifty years."

The trio got up and followed Agatha out of the House of Memories. The sun was high in the sky already, and they were still in their scuffed armor without proper baths since Vermilion several weeks ago. Gary was running on fumes after the emergency Max Potion Ivy had given him.

Agatha tossed a Pokéball on the ground and a huge Golbat emerged from within the light. It had a leather saddle strapped to its back, which Agatha mounted.

"Hey, wait," Ash said. "I just realized I haven't actually caught Haunter. How do you catch a Ghost?"

Agatha smirked. "You don't. They haunt you until you exorcise them. Or until you die."

"...Oh."

She spared the trio one last glance, her gaze lingering on Gary. "Take care. You'll need it."

With that, she tapped Golbat's flank and the blue bat launched into the sky. In a matter of minutes, Agatha had disappeared into the western horizon.

"Well," Ivy said. "She was a real bundle of joy."

Ash rolled his eyes. "Aw, lay off. She's an old lady, for cryin' out loud."

"Did you even *hear* how she talked to me? Like I was gum under her shoe?"

"Hey, think of it as keeping us humble, yeah? Believe me, she gave me an earful, too."

"Stop overreacting, both of you," Gary said, heading for the Pokémon Center. He yawned and stretched his arms over his head.

Ivy and Ash exchanged a look, and Haunter burst out laughing.

"Yeah, must be nice not getting chewed out," Ivy said, biting back a

smirk. "Guess Agatha really did see something of the Professor in you."

Gary waved at them over his shoulder. "I'm literally about to pass out, so remind me to argue that innuendo later."

Ivy ran after him and looped her arm through his. He leaned on her, and she said something to him that Ash couldn't make out. Pikachu pawed at his pant leg and squeaked.

"Yup, pretty sure Ivy sees what Agatha saw, too, buddy."

He held out a hand for Pikachu to crawl up onto his shoulder, and the yellow rodent clung to his right shoulder while Haunter hovered over the left. The Ghost laughed and laughed as Ash tailed Gary and Ivy, hands in his pockets and eyes to the vast, sunlit sky.

Agatha soared over Kanto proper atop Golbat while her Ghosts rested after the hard battle. Her silver hair whipped behind her in the wind, and goggles protected her eyes from the windburn. She mulled over what she would report to the rest of the League. Lavender was safe, but the kids had a point about Team Rocket, and it was no longer possible to ignore the organization.

Sam, why would you send three kids to do your life's work?

Only unintelligible whispers answered her, and she was left to wonder.

She flew over Saffron and spared the sprawling metropolis a cursory glance. A part of her wondered how Sam was after all these years apart. His wife was dead, and his daughter, too. That night still burned as brightly in her mind as the fires that had consumed the women.

"*If there's anything, anything at all...*"

He never did ask her for anything.

Lost in elegiac longings of the past, she didn't hear the Ghosts' warning until it was nearly too late. A fiery plume singed Golbat's left wing as it swooped, and Agatha nearly fell out of her saddle. The Ghosts resting within her came to life in a whorl of abysmal whispers. The Charizard's mount steered the bulky reptile higher so it flew above Golbat. Agatha squinted through her goggles, but all she could see was a black-uniformed rider with no identifying symbols or marks.

Even his hair was tucked back into a beret.

"Kill them both," Agatha commanded.

The two Gengar squealed in glee and launched high into the air, shadows without form, and chased after Charizard. Mismagius sent a trill of trepidation down Agatha's spine, and she looked back over her shoulder just as a Skarmory, silent as death, rammed into Golbat and knocked it off course. The silver bird twisted around in mid-air and swooped in close. The coarse feathers on its wings hardened to titanium points as it aimed a deadly Steel Wing at Golbat.

"Confuse Ray!" Agatha shouted over the wind.

Golbat swerved, and Agatha held on for dear life. The bat opened its mouth impossibly wide and generated a sonic wave in a concentrated beam that shot straight for Skarmory and its mysterious, covered rider.

"Go," Agatha bellowed.

Mismagius leaped from her back and roared like thunder as it slammed into Skarmory and Golbat's Confuse Ray hit the rider. The rider, a woman, screamed and began tearing at her own face like it burned. Her gloved nails came away bloody with chunks of cheek, while Mismagius made quick work of Skarmory. The Ghost raked shadowy talons out from inside the bird's stomach, spilling its entrails to the ground below. Skarmory folded in on itself, and it soon fell from the sky, taking its mad rider with it. Mismagius floated alongside Agatha and giggled like a little girl.

But the victory was short-lived when another Skarmory and a Fearow showed up, also mounted by nondescript riders. They circled her and angled down from above to attack. Agatha tried to angle Golbat through an opening between them, but they were fast. The two Gengar were still contending with Charizard, wary of its fire.

"To me!" Agatha called.

But by the time she got the words out, it was too late. Golbat dodged the Skarmory, but the giant Fearow tore into the blue bat's right wing and broke the bone. Golbat shrieked and tumbled out of the sky, taking Agatha with it. Mismagius raced after her, shrieking, and the two Gengar were not far behind.

The riders redirected the two Skarmory and Charizard to circle over

Agatha as she plummeted. Ignoring them, she worked on the buckles to Golbat's saddle, cursing the sticky leather. Her hands ached from the precision handling, and she cut her palm on a brass buckle. Golbat swerved in the air and the wind knocked Agatha against the bat's back. The ground was fast approaching, and her Ghosts were still out of range. Cursing her old age and the fate that doomed her to wallow in it, she bit down on her tongue and yanked the buckle securing her to the saddle with all her strength. Her frail fingers popped and burned with arthritic pain, like someone had stuck her with a thousand needles in the joints. But the buckle broke free and she kicked off of Golbat. The bat wailed and crashed through the trees below.

Agatha had no time to mourn it as she reached for her Ghosts. Mismagius dove for her as fast as it could, and the Ghost's comforting chill grazed her fingertips just as she hit the trees and crashed through the branches. They snapped so loudly to her ears, ears filled with demons that liked to whisper, torment.

The hell you know.

It was her last thought as she hit the ground and shadows danced in her memory before everything went dark.

11. Cerulean City, Part 3

Triumvirate, chapter 11: Cerulean City, Part 3
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

With Gary and Ash both passed out from exhaustion and injury, Ivy was left to help out Jenny and the clinic nurses with the ailing townspeople. She showered and dressed, refreshed if not a little sore after the marathon fight. She'd never needed much sleep and often would go for days without it when she was with Team Rocket on a mission.

"*Reaper.*"

Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she counted her scars and thought about what Agatha had revealed. Perhaps it explained her frequent insomnia, the lack of physical exhaustion now. She ran her fingers over her belly, where phantom nails had raked into her. There was no trace of them despite what Ash had told Gary and her about the Rocket Agent he'd killed with Haunter's help once they regrouped and Agatha departed. Ripped his soul out, was the way he'd described it.

Maybe I don't have a soul to rip out anymore.

Gary shifted under the covers in the adjoining bedroom they'd all rented at the Pokémon Center, and Ivy smoothed out her shirt. It had been a long time since she'd worn plainclothes without armor. She wrapped her green cargo jacket tighter around her middle and took a deep breath.

"Better get to it."

She cast a last look at Gary and Ash sleeping soundly in their beds. Pikachu looked up and squeaked. She raised a finger to her lips and winked. The yellow rodent watched her exit the room in near absolute silence and went back to sleep.

Ivy found Jenny at the clinic, and as soon as the older woman saw her, she visibly deflated with relief.

"Oh, thank god you're here. We could use all the help we can get." She tossed Ivy an apron to wear over her clothes. "Put that on so you don't stain your clothes."

Ivy put on the bright, pink apron and got to work without complaint. She helped the nurses and Jenny stitch up superficial wounds, reset broken bones, and the like. The mists still clung to the town, but the strange chill she'd detected in them the other day was gone. The Ghosts had returned to wherever they'd come from.

The minutes turned to hours, and Ivy moved from body to body, doing as the nurses instructed. She was so lost in the monotony that she jumped when a hand closed around her wrist all of a sudden. A girl, maybe a couple years her junior, looked up at her with eyes so dark and blue they were almost violet.

"You," she whispered. "You're one of the people who got rid of the Ghosts, right?"

Ivy eyed the girl's grip on her wrist. "That's right."

The girl's face was scuffed up, and a thick scar passed through her left eye, an old wound. Ivy did a cursory glance for weapons out of habit. The girl wore loose, black pants and sandals. A violet sash tied her lightweight shirt in place, and her arms were gloved and bandaged. Ivy narrowed her eyes and brushed the knife at her thigh with her free hand.

"You're not injured," she said softly, a warning in her tone. "Who are you?"

The girl smirked and made a show of struggling to sit up in her stretcher. "Just wanted to meet one of you in person, at least. I saw what you did here. That guy you were with, the Clairvoyant. Did he make it?"

Ivy drew her knife in one fluid motion, but the girl was lightning fast and caught her wrist. Their faces were inches apart, and Ivy got an eyeful of her freckles and split lip. Her curly, chestnut hair was tied back in a bun, but frizzles escaped it and tickled Ivy's forehead.

"Calm down, I'm not here to fight. I just wanted to make absolutely certain."

Nurses bustled around behind Ivy in her peripheral vision. She was near one of the walls next to an open window. The girl followed her gaze and chuckled.

"Don't worry, I didn't steal this bed when I came in. It was already empty."

Ivy applied more pressure to her hunting knife, which hovered just a hair's breadth from the girl's throat. "You have five seconds."

"I saw how you and those boys took out the Rocket Agents here. I like your style."

"You mentioned Clairvoyant," Ivy said. "What did you mean by that?"

"That guy you were with. They fight a certain way, like puppet masters. Listen, I know what I saw." Her nails dug into Ivy's wrist and drew blood. "And I know what you are, too, Reaper."

"Then you know I wouldn't lose sleep over your death."

"I'm not with Team Rocket. Why would I reveal myself if I was?"

The girl was beginning to sweat under the constant pressure of the knife, and Ivy's hands ached with the pressure the girl was applying. They stared each other down for another couple of seconds before Ivy relented. The girl scooted back against the wall and put one hand on the open windowsill.

"How do you know about us?" Ivy said.

"I'm like you, sort of. I'm Veleno." At Ivy's lack of visible recognition, she added, "A Poison Tamer."

"If you're against Team Rocket, like you claim, why not help us? We could've used it."

"Looks to me like you had enough help in the end."

An old man gasped in pain nearby, and a nurse rushed to his side to stop the bleeding from the sutures he'd ripped out in a spasm.

"What do you want? Why reveal yourself now?"

"Like I said, I just wanted make certain."

"Certain of what?"

"Ivy, I need your help over here!" Jenny shouted from several beds away where she struggled with a little girl having a seizure.

Ivy spared her a brief glance over her shoulder, and when she looked back, the girl had slipped through the window. Only her face was visible under the thick hood she'd pulled over her head.

"Nevermind that right now. We'll meet again, I'm sure." She tossed a round, glass vial through the window filled with shimmering, pale pink liquid. "For your Houndour."

Ivy caught the vial on instinct. "What? Hey, wait a minute—"

"Janine," the girl said. "You better remember my name if you know what's good for you."

Ivy climbed up on the bed and looked out the window just as Janine disappeared, but when she stuck her head outside, there was no sign of the elusive girl.

"Ivy!"

Jenny was having trouble restraining the seizing girl, and Ivy abandoned her search for Janine and pocketed the vial. She pulled on a pair of sterile rubber gloves and helped Jenny restrain the girl while they waited for the seizure to pass. Ivy cast a glance back at the window, but there was no sign of Janine. Another patient was already occupying the stretcher she'd commandeered.

"Hand me that EpiPen," Jenny said.

"Sure."

Ivy tossed the thick syringe to Jenny, who uncapped it and stuck the little girl in her thigh. The weight of the vial bobbed in the inside of Ivy's jacket, where she'd stashed it.

"Hey, I'll be right back. Gotta check on Houndour at the Pokémon Center."

Jenny nodded. "Sure, just make it fast."

"You won't even know I was gone."

Ash tossed and turned in his bed, disturbing Pikachu's slumber and knocking it off the bed. He groaned in his half sleep and pulled the pillow over his head to block out the voices, but they only got louder. Unable to take it anymore, he snapped his eyes open and sat up.

"Would you guys keep it down? Geez."

But when he looked around, Gary was running the shower in the adjoining bathroom and there was no sign of Ivy. The sun was low on

the western horizon. He'd slept the entire day away.

"The hell...?"

Pikachu squeaked angrily and hopped back up on the bed. Tiny sparks danced on its cheeks in warning. Whispers in his ear drew his attention skyward, where Haunter hovered.

"You," Ash said. "Those voices..."

Haunter grinned and floated down to Ash's eye level. Pikachu kept a wary eye on the Ghost, but it didn't move away. A shadowy plume of smoke connected Haunter to Ash's chest.

"So this is how it's gonna be? You're gonna wake me up whenever you feel like it?"

A giddy tremor crawled from Ash's chest down to his fingertips and toes, making him shiver. He rubbed his ears and tried to focus on blocking out the incessant whispers.

"This is gonna take some getting used to."

The shower switched off, and a few minutes later Gary emerged with a towel around his waist. His mussed hair dripped a trail of water as he went back to his bed and rummaged around his pack for clean clothes.

"You're awake," he said.

"Couldn't sleep with all the noise."

Gary cast him a glance askance, and his gaze lingered on Haunter, who hovered at Ash's pillow and attempted to poke it, only have its hand pass through it.

"I don't hear anything."

Ash rubbed his ear. "Yeah, be glad you don't."

Gary pulled on jeans and a T-shirt and dried out his hair with the towel. "Where's Ivy? Her bed hasn't been slept in."

"I dunno where—"

Haunter pressed a finger to Ash's temple all of a sudden, and Ash hissed. His eyes rolled back in his head, and the room's light changed.

Like looking through water, he saw himself lying in bed, passed out, and the sun was bright in the sky.

Ivy looked back at Gary and him before slipping out the door without a sound. As suddenly as it had come, the vision faded and Ash sputtered as he fell back against the wall. Gary, who'd been across the room just a moment ago, was now crouched with one leg on Ash's bed and a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, Ash!"

Ash raised a hand to his temple and looked around for Haunter. "Ugh, that sucked. A little *warning* next time."

The Ghost threw back its head and laughed, and the deformed skull hidden within its gaseous body laughed with it. Ash swallowed the bile in his throat.

"What happened?" Gary demanded. He glared up at the Ghost. "Did it do something?"

"Ivy left," Ash said by way of answer. "I saw her go."

Gary frowned and leaned back. "What? But you just said you didn't know where she was."

Ash shook his head. "I didn't see her, Haunter did. It showed me."

"Geez, Ash. Are you sure about letting a Ghost tag along?"

"Haunter saved my life and Pikachu's. That's good enough for me. And, well, if I'm really what Agatha said, I can't get rid of Haunter even if I wanted to. I think it'll be a good trump card for us down the line. No one ever expects a Ghost."

Haunter drifted closer to Gary, but when they locked eyes, it shied away in fear. Ash put a hand over his heart.

"Wow, it's kind of scared of you," he said.

"Why?"

"Dunno. Maybe it's got somethin' to do with you being Clairvoyant? Ghosts don't like Psychics, right?"

Gary sighed and slipped off the bed. "I'm not psychic. That's ridiculous."

"Clairvoyant," Ash corrected.

"Whatever, same difference. I'm gonna go look for Ivy. I can't believe she didn't get any sleep. What is she even thinking running around by herself after what happened? Annoying woman."

Ash's stomach growled, and Haunter rubbed its nonexistent belly in jest. "Maybe we can get some food, too."

"Yeah, just take a shower first. You look like hell."

"Yeah, yeah."

He rolled out of bed and headed for the bathroom to shower. In fifteen minutes, he was dressed in his favorite, red jacket and headed downstairs with Gary in tow. In the lobby they ran into Ivy, who was speaking with Nurse Joy and handing her a vial of shimmering, pink liquid.

"Wow, this is Muk and Grimer anti-toxin," Nurse Joy was saying. "This'll definitely speed along Houndour's recovery better than a regular Antidote. I'll deduct this from your bill. We haven't had much opportunity to resupply in a while, so this is a big help."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

"Ivy." Ash approached her and they met in the middle of the lobby.

"Hey, sleepy heads. You guys feeling better?"

"Much."

Gary tugged at the soiled, pink apron she wore. "So, didn't get your fill of the fight yesterday?"

Ivy blinked and looked down at her apron. "Oh, crap, I forgot I had this on." She undid the tie in back and slipped the apron off along with her rubber gloves. "I was at the clinic helping Jenny and the nurses. The townspeople went through a hell of an ordeal."

"You didn't sleep at all," Ash said. "Aren't you tired?"

Ivy shrugged. "A little. But I'll sleep tonight while you guys're wide awake."

"As long as you're okay," Gary said, eyeing her with suspicion. "You *are* okay, right?"

Ivy put a hand on his shoulder and leaned her face close to his. "Why, you worried about me?"

Gary flushed prettily and backed away, nearly tripping. "Cut that out!" he hissed. "This is a *public place*."

Ash laughed. "There's a room upstairs and a clean bed Ivy didn't use."

Gary glared daggers at him, but Ivy headed for the entrance, unperturbed.

"You guys coming? There's a lotta people who still need help at the clinic."

"What're you trying to pull?" Gary said.

Ash raised his eyebrows and waved his empty hands. "I'm not pullin' anything, see?"

He jogged to the entrance before Gary could grab him. Haunter floated overhead and cackled. Ash bit back a grin of his own as he stepped outside and forced himself not to look back.

They spent the rest of the day helping out at the clinic. Ash and Gary got matching pink aprons for the night, and the nurses had a few giggles at their expense. The rush calmed down around nine at night, and the trio accepted Jenny's invitation to a late dinner.

"Thank you again for all your help," she said as they ate together in her home. "There's no way we'd have managed without you guys."

"I'm glad we got here when we did," Gary said. "Looks like a day later and things could've been too far gone."

Ivy and Ash were busy shoveling food into their mouths and barely followed the conversation except to surface for air. Gary rolled his eyes discreetly, but decided against starting a fight. The food was more than deserved for their efforts.

Jenny refilled everyone's glasses with a smile. "I wonder if I can convince you three to stick around for a bit. We could always use the extra muscle, you know."

Ash and Ivy looked up.

"You want us to stay?" Ivy said.

"I know you three have done way more than I could've ever expected from strangers, and for that Lavender's in your debt. But if you don't have any immediate plans, I wouldn't mind the help. I still have a pretty much nonexistent Police Department I need to restaff, and who knows how long that'll take?"

"That's a nice offer," Gary said. "But we do still have a few Gym Leaders to visit. Agatha was right. We can't just stop now. At the end of the day, the Elite Four are only four people."

"Just like us," Ash said. "And look what we did."

"There's a *little* bit of a difference between the Elite Four and us."

Jenny put up her hands. "Hey, I don't want to mess up your mission. Hell, after what happened here, I'd gladly go with you to stop Team Rocket for good if I could afford to leave. But anyway, the offer stands. You're more than welcome here whenever you want to stop by."

"We might take you up on that," Ivy said. "Let us talk it over. We haven't decided where we'll go yet."

"Of course."

They finished dinner and headed back to the Pokémon Center for a night's rest after. Lavender's mists glowed pearlescent under the moon and stars. Peaceful, like it was meant to be. There was a humming in the air, like it teemed with life despite the bones buried underfoot.

"So?" Ash said once they were back in their rented room. "What d'you guys think about what Jenny said?"

"I think she has a point," Ivy said. "This town has no Gym Leader, and if we hadn't gotten here when we did, I don't even think there'd be a Lavender Town left."

Eevee sat on Gary's bed and walked back and forth, rubbing its soft fur against his arms and back. "What about the mission? We still have a few Gyms to hit up. You're not thinking of quitting now, are you?"

"Of course not." Ivy lay back on her bed. "Ugh, I dunno. I just wanna help, I guess. Somehow, I feel like we're responsible."

Ash chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing, just that you're actually a good person under all the scary."

Ivy sat up and frowned. "Scary? I'm not the one with a second shadow."

Haunter floated next to Ash on his bed and put its hands up like it had done nothing wrong.

"Look, guys, I get what you're saying," Gary said, "but I think it's especially important now more than ever that we keep traveling. Think about if Team Rocket could broadcast that radio wave across all of Kanto. What if they've figured out a frequency that could control other types of Pokémon?"

Ivy shook her head. "No, if they had something like that, there'd be no point in the experiment here in Lavender. They could actually take over the world with something like that, and they haven't. I think we're a long way off from something like that, if it's even possible."

They sat in silence for a moment, thinking.

"Well, it'd make the most sense to head to Saffron next," Gary said. Eevee settled into his lap and began kneading his jeans to make itself comfortable.

"Misty said we weren't ready," Ash said. "Actually, that reminds me. I did promise I'd bring back the armor she lent me."

"Misty doesn't know we have a Haunter and a Tyranitar on our team now," Ivy said. "I think that makes a difference."

Gary sighed as he scratched Eevee's belly. "I know we've made a lot of progress, and I hate to admit this, but honestly? Misty had a point. Surge, too, for that matter. We're just not where we need to be battle-wise. Agatha being here was a big help, especially for Ash. I dunno how it would've turned out without her around."

"I'd be dead right now," Ash said.

Haunter's perpetual smile fell to a dramatic frown, and Ash shivered violently. He clutched his head.

"Ugh, Haunter, we gotta work on your empathy."

Pikachu pawed at Ash's side in concern.

"So we need to train," Ivy said. "Well, I know where to start. You guys have *got* to learn how to fight. I can't be saving your asses every time, you know."

"You look for every excuse to fight," Gary said. "Just because you haven't seen me fight doesn't mean I can't."

"Well, *I* definitely can't," Ash said. "Woulda been useful against Surge, actually."

Ivy crossed her arms and frowned. "How about this: we head back to Cerulean and catch up with Misty, resupply, whatever. Then we talk to her about how best to get up to Gym Leader level. If the rest of the Gym Leaders wanna fight like Surge did, we need to be ready. Who better to teach us than a Gym Leader herself?"

"Misty never agreed to teach us," Gary said.

"We might as well ask." Ash smirked. "*I'll* ask her."

Gary rolled his eyes. "Oh, *please*."

"What? Don't be jealous 'cause she liked me better than you."

"Who the hell would be jealous of *you*?"

"Okay, settle down," Ivy said. "Goddamned prima donnas. How do we get back to Cerulean from here?"

Gary scowled, and Eevee sat up to bump his chin with its head. "Fastest way would be through Rock Tunnel."

"Fuck no," Ash said. "What'd I say about no more caves?"

"C'mon Ash," Ivy said. "You've got a freaking Ghost with you. I think whatever's hiding in Rock Tunnel will be more scared of you than you'll be of it."

"Hey, you have no idea how scared I can get."

"Oh, for god sakes."

"Rock Tunnel's the fastest way, end of discussion," Gary said. "We'll have a word with Misty and Brock about getting reinforcements for Lavender since we won't be sticking around."

"There it is, then," Ivy said. "All hail the Clairvoyant."

Ash stifled a laugh. "Hear, hear."

Gary sighed and closed his eyes. "This will *not* become a thing with you two."

Ivy yawned and stretched out on her bed. "Anyway, *I* need to get some sleep if we're doing Mt. Moon, Take Two tomorrow."

"You know what? This time I'm walking in the middle. No way I'm ending up alone in the dark again," Ash said.

The trio turned in for the night. Haunter drifted around the room, peering at its new Tamer and his companions. They slept soundly under the moonlight diffusing through the window. Haunter peered outside at the mists and grinned.

Ash turned in his sleep and shuddered. Haunter drifted back to hover over him and raked a spectral hand over his face. Ash sucked in a breath and fell still, sinking deeper into his pillow. Pikachu, wide awake, squeaked up at the Ghost. Haunter nodded emphatically at the yellow rodent, smiling. Curling up under Ash's arm, Pikachu drifted off to sleep, leaving Haunter to watch over the group.

The Ghost hovered near the ceiling and faded to amorphous fog. Only its red eyes gazed down at the group, ever watchful for the things that go bump in the night.

The next morning after breakfast, the trio stood just outside the mouth of Rock Tunnel with Jenny.

"Thanks for everything, Jenny," Ash said with a bright smile.

"Believe me, it's me who should be thanking you," Jenny said. "I'm sad to see you go, though."

"We'll be back," Gary said. "Once we check in with Misty in Cerulean, we'll have a better idea of how to proceed."

Jenny nodded. "Well, I wish I could do more for you guys than just restock your supplies. Lavender owes you a lot more."

"I guess we *are* running low on mon—"

Gary wrapped an arm around Ivy's head and covered her mouth with his hand before she could finish that sentence. "Really, it's fine."

Ivy struggled in his grip, but he held tight.

"Well, be seein' you." Ash saluted.

Jenny laughed. "Be safe. It's no Mt. Moon, but Rock Tunnel's still dangerous."

"Oof!"

Gary doubled over and clutched his stomach where Ivy had elbowed him hard in the gut to get free. She wiped her mouth. "I think we'll be okay this time around."

She selected a Pokéball from her belt and tossed it. From the burst of light, Tyranitar materialized and stood up to its tremendous height. Ivy put a hand flat on its flank and caught its yellow eye.

"Wow," Jenny said. "That thing's a real monster if I ever saw one."

Ivy smirked. "Nah, he's a big sweetie." She patted Tyranitar's flank. "Right, Tyranitar?"

The green dinosaur growled low in its belly and revealed thick incisors under its curled lips.

"Uh, I dunno if I'd use that word," Ash said. "Like, not even close."

Gary recovered from his beating and glared daggers at Ivy. "You *punched* me."

"Oh, grow a pair," Ivy said. "This is what I'm saying about you guys not knowing how to fight."

Gary's eye twitched and he crossed his arms. "I told you already, I know how to fight. I'm just not a junkie about it."

"Uh-huh, *sure*."

Jenny stifled a laugh. "Are they always like that?" she whispered to Ash.

"Every day. Kinda wish they'd wake up and smell the Roserade, but it's fun to watch in the meantime."

Another flash of light blinded the four trainers and Nidoking appeared next to Gary. The armored rodent zeroed in on Tyranitar, and the two behemoths glowered at each other. Tyranitar growled, a deep, feral

rumble, and Nidoking stood up to its full height despite its few feet of height disadvantage. Ivy and Gary abandoned their tiff and threw themselves in front of their Pokémon.

"Easy," Gary said. "Stand down, Nidoking."

"Calm down, Tyranitar. It's not worth beating up a small fry," Ivy said.

Gary whirled. "*What* did you just say?"

Ivy winked over her shoulder.

"I see what you mean," Jenny said.

"Okay, guys, break it up," Ash said, stepping in between Ivy and Gary. "I promised Misty I'd bring back her armor, and she's not gonna wait forever."

Gary rolled his eyes. "That's the lamest excuse I've ever heard."

"Aw, c'mon, I know I've come up with lamer."

"*That's* definitely true." Ivy slung an arm around Ash's shoulder, disturbing Haunter, who floated overhead.

The Ghost peered at Ivy curiously, but it drifted to Ash's other side, as far away from her as possible.

"Huh, it doesn't like me."

Ash glanced at Haunter. "You think?" He shuddered all of a sudden and rubbed his temple. "...Okay, maybe he's a little freaked out."

"Looks like you three have a lot to deal with," Jenny said. "Maybe a nice walk in the pitch dark'll do you all some good."

"Yes, excellent idea," Ivy preened.

"Let's just get this over with." Gary motioned to Nidoking, and the big rodent tailed him but kept an eye on Tyranitar just in case.

"See ya!" Ash waved to Jenny and jogged after Gary.

Ivy tailed the boys in back with Tyranitar while Gary led the march with Nidoking. Rock Tunnel, like Mt. Moon, had been hollowed out for human passage between Lavender and Cerulean. Nidoking's pounding footsteps echoed in the cavern, drowned out only by

Tyranitar's pursuit farther behind. Ash walked at a leisurely pace in the middle with Haunter and Pikachu at his shoulders.

Unlike Mt. Moon, Gary saw no sign of wild Pokémon. He smirked up at Nidoking lumbering along beside him.

"Don't worry," he whispered. "You'll get your chance later."

Nidoking peered down at its trainer and grumbled low in the pit of its belly.

The hike through Rock Tunnel was almost boring. The most exciting thing the trio encountered was an abandoned Zubat nest. The walls were covered in guano.

"Hey, Ash," Ivy called from the back. "Brings back memories, huh?"

"Haha, very funny. And by that I mean it's totally *not*."

Altogether, the journey was a little over four hours in the dark with only Pikachu's natural glow to light the way. Gary breathed a sigh of relief when they emerged on the other side at the edge of a cliff. Cerulean City shone like a living sapphire below several miles out to the west with its sparkling fountains and mangrove fields.

"You know?" Ash said, drawing up next to him. "It almost feels like coming home."

Pallet Town had been burning the last time Gary saw it. Daisy had been so strong helping those who'd lost everything when their grandfather chose not to be.

"Sure," he said softly. "Just like home."

Ash grinned and went on ahead, missing the way Gary's shoulders slumped just a little. Gary recalled Nidoking and stuffed his hands in his pockets. He walked to the edge of the cliff and scanned the scenery below.

"Missing home?"

Ivy didn't join him at the cliff's edge, but she stood just behind him out of reach. He didn't turn.

"You got a bad habit of eavesdropping."

A flash of light indicated she'd recalled Tyranitar, leaving just the two

of them on top of the world looking down on the life that flourished below. Gary closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"We said no secrets," she said.

He released his breath and opened his eyes. "It's not a secret. I never said you were wrong."

She laughed lightly and leaned close to his ear from behind. "I know."

Gary set his jaw and glared at her over his shoulder. "What's your prob—"

He ate his words when she snaked an arm around his neck, hooked his jaw with her fingers, and drew him into a crushing kiss, close-mouthed and gently bruising, like an ache he didn't realize he'd had until now. It was over before he could react, and she raked her nails over the short stubble along his jawline as she pulled away.

"In case next time you really do die," she murmured against his lips.

She pulled away without a second look back and followed the switchback path Ash had taken down the cliff toward Cerulean. Gary stared after her a moment, suddenly very warm. He rubbed his lips to get the tingle out.

She'd made it around the first switchback and was fast catching up to Ash by the time he composed himself. Gary set his jaw and jogged after them both, intent on catching up.

Ash made a beeline for the Cerulean Gym over Ivy's complaints about checking into a room at the Pokémon Center first. There was so much to recount to Misty, and time was wasting. Cerulean was just as they'd left it, and Ash inhaled the dewy air as he walked. Haunter, who'd taken to resting within him, emerged when it felt Ash's spirits lift and tried to mimic his deep breathing motions.

The Gym's double glass doors were unlocked when he arrived, and he went in without a second thought.

"Misty? You here?"

"Can I help you?"

A slender woman in a bikini and a shortie wetsuit unzipped to her

waist walked toward him from the Gym's main arena. Her wet feet left tracks in the glossy tile. Like Misty, she had red hair that was so bright it was almost orange in shade, and sparkling, blue eyes that looked down at Ash over a straight-edge nose not unkindly.

"Yeah, I'm looking for Misty." He paused before adding, "You must be one of her sisters. Daisy or Violet?"

The woman smiled a little. "Daisy. You seem to know my little sister pretty well."

Ash grinned and put a hand behind his head. "Just a little."

Daisy followed the path of his hand and came face to face with Pikachu and Haunter resting on Ash's shoulders. Her eyes widened and she took a step back.

"W-What is that thing?"

Haunter opened its serrated mouth in a grin and spread its disembodied hands. Daisy fumbled for a Pokéball at her belt and released a Dewgong that landed on the tile with a heavy slap.

"Already causing trouble, Ash?"

Ivy appeared next to him with Gary not far behind.

"Whoa! Hey, easy now," Ash said. "Haunter's friendly. Well, sort of. I mean! It's not gonna do anything, okay, I swear."

"What's going on out here?"

Another woman appeared dressed similarly to Daisy, though where Daisy and Misty were brightly colored and soft around the edges, this woman was cut from marble and had the glare to prove it. Her dark hair was tied back in a thick braid that swished behind her like a lash when she walked.

"These guys say they know Misty, but I've never seen them before," Daisy said. "And that thing... I don't like the air around it."

The woman examined the trio before settling first on Pikachu, then on Haunter. She narrowed her eyes at the Ghost. "I believe that's called a Haunter, though I've never heard of anyone actually training one aside from Agatha of the Elite Four."

"Is it gonna be like this everywhere we go?" Ivy said crossing her

arms.

Gary sighed in frustration. "Listen, we do know Misty, and we're here to talk to her." He showed the women his Cascade Badge to prove his point.

"Oh, Violet, these must be the three Misty told us about," Daisy said.

Violet accepted the Cascade Badge and held it up to the light to examine. "Hm. It's genuine, all right." She tossed it back to Gary. "You three're the ones who helped my little sister out with Team Rocket a while back."

"That's right," Ivy said.

"So, is Misty here?" Ash said.

The sisters exchanged a look before Violet nodded. "Yeah, but she's busy with a guest."

"Oh, well, I can wait."

Violet nodded to them. "This way. You shouldn't linger in doorways."

Daisy kept a watchful eye on Haunter, but she followed Violet with her hefty Dewgong and led the trio into the Gym proper where Gary had had his battle with Misty the last time they were here.

"So how's Bill doing?" Ash asked when the five of them congregated around some chairs in the sitting area just shy of the indoor marsh. "I thought you guys were all taking turns lookin' out for him."

"We were," Daisy said. "But the threat of Team Rocket's been almost nonexistent lately, so we moved him to the city. It's important for all of us to be present here. One Gym Leader can't protect the whole city by herself, after all."

"Is he around?" Gary asked. "I'd like to talk to him."

"He's around." Violet crossed her arms. "I'm sure we can arrange something."

A door across the way opened and Misty walked out with her guest. Ash got up and jogged through the edge of the marsh to get to her instead of waiting for her to come to him.

"Hey, Misty!" He waved, and Pikachu squeaked enthusiastically.

Misty looked back over her shoulder and lit up. "Ash, you're back!"

She went to meet him, and before she could do anything about it, Ash picked her up in a hug and swung her around.

"Hey, what're you doing? Put me down, there's people here!"

Pikachu had jumped down from Ash's shoulder and scampered around Misty to get out of the way. Ash laughed and put her down.

"Sorry, guess I'm just happy to see a familiar face after everything we've been through lately."

She did her best to hide the flush on her cheeks, but to no avail. "Well, if it's familiar faces you wanna see, then today's your lucky day."

"Huh?"

Splashing in the marsh just behind Misty drew both their attentions. Pikachu sat on the damp grass and enjoyed a scratch behind the ears from Misty's guest. Ash paled in recognition.

"What'sa matter, kid? Surprised to see me?"

"Surge," Ash said.

The Red Flash himself scooped up Ash's Pikachu and stood up to his full but modest height. Even so, Ash's stomach turned on itself and his heart beat faster with a sudden rush of adrenaline and the urge to fight or flee. Overhead, Haunter sensed his mood swing and began to roil with violet smoke in warning. Surge eyed the Ghost while Pikachu climbed up his shoulder and pawed at his aviators. Gary and Ivy joined the group with Violet and Daisy, and the trio once again faced off against Surge.

"I see you had a good time in Lavender," Surge said. "Made a new friend, huh?"

Haunter's garbled susurrations intensified, and Ash rubbed his ear to block it out, unable to ignore it like he did the usual din while the Ghost was so agitated.

"What're you doing here?" Ivy demanded.

"Business. But I was also hopin' I'd run into you three after you finished up in Lavender."

Ash growled low in his throat. "You coward. You coulda sent help to Lavender a long time ago when they needed it. Maybe things wouldna gotten so outta hand if you had."

"Ash," Misty said.

"No, Cerulean's just as guilty, Misty, I'm sorry. Lavender was literally dying, and no one sent help." He rubbed his ears harder as Haunter continued to simmer overhead. "I can't even believe this. How can you all just stand there like it's no big deal that all those people died?"

Surge stepped forward, and Pikachu squeaked at Ash. "Can't say what woulda happened if I listened to Bernie and sent help. Fact is, I don't give a fuck about what coulda been. Can't do nothin' about it now, so no point in whinin'."

Ash held his ground, but the very air around Surge crackled with energy, static. Agatha had warned Ash that Surge was a Tamer like him, a Fulmen with an affinity for Electric types. He glanced briefly at Pikachu and how easily the yellow rodent had gotten comfortable on Surge's shoulder, how easily Surge had cowed it with a few words and a harsh tone the last time they crossed paths.

Surge put a hand in his pants pocket, and Ash reached for Ivysaur's Pokéball in response. "Point is," Surge continued like nothing was amiss, "*you* were there. All three o' you. Jenny told me the whole story and how you were comin' back this way. So here I am."

"Jenny? Why would she do that?"

"Dense as ever, eh, kid? Jenny was my subordinate before movin' to Lavender to head up the Police Department. Why d'you think she'd send the SOS all the way to Vermilion? She told me about what y'all did for the town." He fished out whatever he'd been looking for and grabbed Ash's hand. "So I flew all the way here to give you this."

The Thunder Badge glittered like a miniature sun in Ash's palm, heavier than it looked. Pikachu squeaked in delight and jumped to Ash's arm so it could sniff the Badge. Haunter also descended to get a better look at the shiny object. Ash's anger deflated to shock and confusion as quickly as it had manifested upon seeing Surge again.

"I... I don't understand."

"That Badge's yours. You earned it, and this time you better hold onto it, or I'll shove it down your puny throat."

Ash closed his hand around the Badge, and a knot formed in his throat. "This means nothing. You never agreed to help us with Team Rocket, just like you didn't help Lavender when they needed it."

"Ash." Misty put a hand on his shoulder. "Surge came here to convince me to join an alliance between Vermilion, Cerulean, and Pewter. He told me he was impressed with how you fought, and when he heard Officer Jenny's report about what happened in Lavender, he changed his mind about staying out of the fight."

"An alliance?" Violet said. "Coming from Vermilion? I must be dreaming."

Surge crossed his arms. "This ain't no dream." To Ash he said, "Provin' yourself in a Gym battle's one thing. Survivin' the shit that went down in Lavender's a whole nother can o' worms. So I'll bite. You say you wanna light a fire under Team Rocket's asses? Well, now I believe you got the cojones to actually pull it off without fuckin' up too much. So count me in."

Ivy bit back a smile and nudged Gary.

"For real?" Ash looked between Surge and Misty. "This is real? You're actually gonna work together?"

Misty smiled. "As soon as Brock gets here in a bit, we'll make it official."

He pulled off his hat and ran shaking fingers over the frayed, red brim. "Ivy, Gary?"

Ivy made that awful squealing sound that made Gary's stomach get intimately acquainted with his esophagus and slung an arm each around the boys, pulling them in close.

"*Hell* yeah!"

Pikachu squeaked excitedly from its new perch atop Ash's head, and Ash laughed. Gary slung an arm around Ash's other shoulder and completed the circle.

"Good job, guys," Gary said, smirking.

Meaty hands pulled back on Gary's and Ash's shoulders and broke the circle.

"Hold up, ladies, this ain't no time to celebrate. You got a long way to go before you're ready to take on the top brass. Time to start training."

"Hey," Ivy said. "The *ladies* here resent that."

"We can train here," Misty said. "We have the space, the equipment, and the experience. You guys should learn how to adapt to tough environments, and Cerulean's about as tough as it gets."

"No argument there," Surge grumbled. "Listen, I put Bernie and Sandra in charge o' my Gym for now, so you got a month tops 'fore I head back to Vermilion. In that time, I wanna see some real progress, and that means you, too, *ladies*." He looked pointedly at Ivy and Misty.

"What's that supposed to mean?" the girls said at the same time.

"It means you Syreni're fish outta water when you bother to get *outta* the goddamned water. And don't even get me started on *you*."

Ivy clenched a fist and made to let Surge have it, but Gary yanked her back and pinned her arms to her sides.

"What the— Gary Oak, you *let me go* or so help me—"

"Shut up."

"So, you really are Syreni," Ash said to Misty. "And you guys, too?"

Violet pressed her lips together. "A word of advice, kid. You don't talk about that kind of thing with just anybody. Say the wrong thing and it can get you killed."

"Not here, it won't," Misty said.

She and Violet locked gazes briefly in challenge.

Violet relented. "No, not here."

"Surge makes a good point," Daisy said. "Here, we can fight well because we know the land and the environment. But somewhere else against enemies we don't even know? That's something no one can prepare for just doing the same things every day."

"Very true. What do you suggest, Lieutenant?" Violet said.

"I *suggest* you lot get into shape, no matter how long it takes." To Ash he said, "You wanted my buy-in? You got it, but I ain't about to fight a

losin' war with toy soldiers. *I'm* the only one here who's actually fought in a war, so we do this *my* way."

"Can we spare that kind of time?" Gary asked. "You weren't in Lavender. The tech they had... It was serious."

Ivy calmed down and stopped struggling, but Gary didn't let her go. "It's also destroyed, in case you forgot," she said. "Team Rocket works slow and steady, and they don't make mistakes. They got nothin' but time, so we can use that at least for a little while."

Surge nodded stiffly. "Exactly."

"So when do we start?" Misty asked.

"How about first thing in the morning?"

Everyone turned to the newcomer, and Ash grinned.

"Brock!"

Brock lowered his flight goggles to his neck. "Been a while, Ash, Gary." He shifted his gaze to Ivy and grinned. "Ivy."

"Brock, I see you haven't changed much," she returned. "Hey, how'd you get here so fast?"

"I flew, obviously. Onix's fast, but he's no bird."

"I didn't know you had any Flyers."

Brock stepped closer to Ivy and leaned down a little to her eye level. "There's a lot you don't know about me."

"Okay, that's quite enough of *that*." Misty grabbed Brock's elbow and dragged him away from Ivy.

"...Anyway," Gary said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Tomorrow works to get started. What'd you have in mind, Surge?"

"Now that you're all here, business tonight, training tomorrow at oh-six-hundred sharp."

"Hey, Lieutenant, how about the first night off? We all just got here, and I'm beat. As for the business, I'm in. Anything to get Team Rocket outta my backyard for good," Brock said.

"You call yourself a Gym Leader with that slacker attitude? Che, no wonder Team Rocket's got Pewter by the balls."

"Whoa there." Violet stepped in between Brock and Surge before a fight could break out. "Sorry to inform you both, but I'm fresh outta rulers for your dick measuring contest." She looked pointedly at Surge. "That goes double for you, old man."

Surge bared his teeth in a snarl. "The fuck did you just say to me, woman?"

"Oh, sorry, let me rephrase—back the *fuck off* and let these kids have one night off, for god sakes."

Everyone went stock still and silent as Violet and Surge glared at each other until Daisy clapped her hands together and smiled brightly. "Well! I'm starving. You guys wanna join us for dinner? It's my turn to cook, and I'm pretty amazing at it."

"Yes," Ash and Ivy said at the same time.

Gary rolled his eyes. "Every time."

"Looks like we're in agreement," Misty said a little more forcefully than necessary. "I'll go see if Bill wants to join us. I'm sure he'll wanna see you guys." She nodded at Gary.

"Uh, I'll go with you," Ash said quickly.

"Me, too," Gary said.

"Me three." Ivy jogged after the group as they headed for the door.

Violet crossed her arms and stared Surge down. She had a good four or five inches on him, but it didn't deter him.

"Well?"

He spit into the marsh water. "This shit would never fly in my town."

"Well, this isn't your town," Violet said. "It's mine. And in *my* town, we like to welcome our guests the right way. So what do you say?"

"I say, excellent," Brock said.

"No one asked *you*," Surge bit out.

In the end, Surge's discipline gave way to everyone else's desire to kick back for a few hours. Daisy's dinner was a huge hit, and the trio found themselves wrapped up in the rare but welcome friendly company. They relaxed in the living area of the Gym on leather couches around a wide, glass coffee table littered with beer bottles and empty plates. The one-way glass walls offered a stunning view of the river and Route Twenty-Four in the distance. Fireflies lit up the bayou and Poliwag sang their night tunes to the half moon overhead.

Surge threw back his fifth beer like it was water, but didn't complain as the others laughed and joked together.

"Ash Ketchum, you *destroyed* my armor." Misty batted him on the chest.

"Hey, I said I'd bring it back, I didn't promise it'd be in mint condition."

She stole his drink and downed it in one, big gulp. Ash watched the amber liquid travel down her slender throat and swallowed hard. The pleasant buzz in head softened his vision, and he smiled lazily as he reached for her waist and scooted closer.

"Forgive me?"

She made a sour face. "You're not getting off the hook that easy."

"Aw, Misty, c'mon."

"No way. Now, you better have a good explanation for what happened. I wanna hear about everything that happened after you guys left Cerulean."

He put his hands behind his head. "Well, that's a long story. We might be up all night if you wanna hear the whole thing."

Her eye twitched. "I don't get how you can make something so crass sound so cute."

He laughed. "I'm a man of many talents. Interested?"

She punched him lightly in the arm. "You cut that out." Her cheeks flushed red as she did her best to look put off.

Brock was busy trying to beat Misty's sisters and Bill in a game of Blackjack and losing miserably.

"Well, fellas, looks like I win again." Bill threw down his cards, and Brock hung his head.

"I just don't get it. How's this even possible? You've won every single hand!"

"Well, Bill's a genius, after all," Daisy said with a smile.

"And a better cheater than you," Violet added.

Brock put a hand over his heart. "Ladies, please, I'd never cheat! Neither at cards nor on a beautiful woman."

"Brock, in this we're kindred spirits," Bill said.

"Hey, old man." Violet swiped Surge's beer and took a long swig. "Don't tell me you can't play cards?"

Surge scowled deeply. "Woman, please. Unlike someone else at the table, *I* don't need to dabble in that shit to get laid. And that's my beer you're suckin' down, by the way."

Violet smirked. "And yet, you're sitting all by yourself. Lemme know how that works out for you."

She downed the rest of his drink and set down the empty bottle in front of him to rejoin the game.

"...and then Raichu and Electabuzz both used Thunder, so Charmeleon was toast, right? But I got Pikachu in there, and this little guy redirected the lighting like—" Ash pulled his hands apart and made a hissing sound. "That's when I knew how I'd beat Surge."

"Uh-huh," Misty said. "Sounds like pure luck, if you ask me."

"No way! I mean, sure, a little, but I think there's some kinda skill in luck, you know?"

"Ash, that doesn't even make any sense."

"What shit're you talkin' now, kid?" Surge had gotten himself a new beer and ripped off the bottle cap with his teeth. He spat the cap at Ash.

Ash caught the cap and held it up over his face. "Just tellin' Misty how I beat you back in Vermilion." He flipped the cap like a coin and snatched it out of mid-air.

Surge chuckled low in his throat. "Oh, you keep talkin' like that. We'll see how you do tomorrow. I'm turnin' in, and I suggest you do the same if don't want your ass handed to you in the mornin'."

Gary sat with Eevee on a loveseat alone, content to sip his drink and let Ash have a good time catching up with Misty. The small feline was fast asleep on his lap as he petted it gently.

"Your Eevee's getting mighty big," Bill said, pulling up a chair. "I reckon he'll evolve soon, maybe another coupla weeks."

"I was just thinking the same thing."

Bill chuckled. "You know, Eevee's an interesting specimen. Always was fascinated myself. How can one Pokémon have the genetic potential to evolve in so many different ways? Ask anyone qualified, and you'll hear as many answers as there are stars in the sky tonight."

"Oh, yeah?" Gary sat up a little. "What's Gramps say about it?"

Bill smiled. "Well, he thinks it's got somethin' to do with the kinda trainer Eevee's got. You know, the Tamer class."

Gary frowned. "So you knew about this, too. Why do I feel like I'm the last to know anything these days?"

Bill watched him a moment as Gary stared into space, thinking of things far from here. "Well, wouldn't be much of a challenge to a Clairvoyant if people just told him everythin'. Your kind," he tapped Gary on the knee, "y'all ain't satisfied til you figure things out on your own, anyway. As for Eevee, whatever the real answer is, you can't go wrong with that little guy." He paused before adding, "Ivy, she's got an Umbreon if I recall, right? A perfect example of Eevee's uncanny potential."

Gary scanned the room, but there was no sign of Ivy anywhere. She'd been playing cards earlier, but he hadn't noticed her leave despite his vantage.

"By the way," Bill said, oblivious to Gary's change of thought. "I'm keen on seein' y'all's progress on the Pokédex. Been working out some kinks in the tech lately, and I've been able to see all the data you collected so far. It's pretty incredible. I think I can start transmitting between the three devices now."

"Sure," Gary said, only half listening. He handed Bill his Pokédex. "I do

wanna talk to you about the Pokédex, but right now I'm gonna turn in."

Bill eagerly accepted the small, blue computer and flipped it open. "O' course, any time. It's not just your skills 'n technique y'all gotta train. You need to know what kinda Pokémon you might encounter in the future, 'specially against the Gym Leaders. I reckon we got a bundle to talk about."

Gary rose out of his chair and recalled Eevee to its Pokéball before heading for the door. Misty and her sisters had given the trio rooms at the Gym for what was shaping up to be an extended stay in Cerulean City. His body tingled pleasantly with the effects of the alcohol he'd consumed, so he went slowly. Ash was so absorbed in his conversation with Misty that he didn't notice Gary leaving.

Once he closed the door to the living area, the Gym grew eerily quiet and dark. Only the river that ran through the main arena oriented him in the dark, and he followed the wall two doors down to the sleeping quarters. A hall light was on when he entered, and he put a hand on the wall as he walked. He licked his lips and tasted salt, sweat perhaps, or the lingering effects of the beer he'd drunk.

Daisy had shown him to a room at the end of the hall that he would share with Ash, while Ivy would room with Misty across the hall. He stopped alongside the wall in between the two rooms and lingered. The two doors, identical, stood at either side.

"What am I even doing?" he murmured to himself.

He ran his hands through his hair hard, scratching his scalp and waking himself up. Taking a deep breath, he knocked on the door to his right and leaned his forehead against it.

"It's open," a muffled voice said on the other side.

He fumbled for the knob and got it open after a small amount of difficulty. Inside it was dark, and he blinked to orient himself after absorbing the plentiful light in the hall. The back wall was made entirely of glass panels held together by carved stone. They let in the light cast by the moon and stars outside, bathing the otherwise pitch black room in a pale cloak. Ivy stood at the window looking out.

"What do you want, Gary?" she said without turning.

He wandered into the room slowly. "You left early. Feeling okay?"

"I'm fine. Just got a little loud in there is all."

There were a few articles of clothing discarded on the floor, softer and smaller than anything he owned, and he did his best to avoid them in the dark. The moonlight reflected off Ivy's bare arms and legs.

"Don't like the loud?"

"I like the dark," she said. "And the quiet." Her blue eyes caught a shadow of the moonlight when she turned to look at him over her shoulder. "But you knew that. And now you're here."

He approached until he stood directly behind her. "You want me to leave?"

She smirked and looked back at him through her lashes. "I want you to say what you came here to say."

He searched her face and tried to focus through the subtle haze of alcohol that magnified the moonlight around her. Maybe to balance himself, or maybe just because—but really because he knew exactly what he was doing—he hooked his fingers under her jaw and forced her to look up at him the way she'd done to him earlier that day.

"Why'd you do it?"

"I told you," she said softly. "In case I don't get a next time."

"You really have no faith in me?"

Her laughter reached his ears like bells at a funeral, pretty but heart wrenching. She faced him fully and ran a hand up his chest. "This," she said barely inches away from him, "You and me, it has nothing to do with faith."

Every instinct in his body screamed to take that last step forward, but his mind had always been stronger than his physical form. So he lingered at the edge of her, too suspicious to close the distance but too afraid to run.

"So it was just the moment," he said at last. "Life and death. We both acted on instinct back then without thinking. You're still the same girl I met in Pallet Town."

She sighed and caught his hand in hers to lower it from her face. "You know, Gary? I think you could use a little more *moment* and less

clarity." She released him and circled around him toward the middle of the room. "You're still the same boy I met in Pallet Town, after all."

Sobriety had never hit him harder than in that moment. Shock devolved to simmering resentment out of nowhere, and he stuffed his hands into his pockets to keep her from seeing them shake. She stood with her arms crossed, gaze hard, waiting. Gary swore under his breath and made for the door without looking back.

Outside, the hallway lights made him flinch as his eyes adjusted. He stood out there for a long while, breathing and trying to forget the darkness, re-acclimate after all those beers. Laughter startled him out of his fitful reverie, and he looked up to see Ash and Misty smiling at something Ash had said.

"Uh, hey man," Ash said. "What're you doing out here?"

Misty frowned in concern. "Everything okay?"

Gary blinked hard and shoved off the wall. He opened the door to his shared room with Ash with more force than was necessary. "I'm fine."

He disappeared into the room, which was dark with disuse and wandered to one of the beds.

"That was weird," Misty's muffled voice drifted in from the hall. "You think he had too much to drink?"

"Nah, not Gary. He always knows when to back off," Ash said.

Gary sank back onto the bed and lay an arm over his eyes to blot out the yellow light filtering in from the hall. Soon, Ash's and Misty's voices faded as sleep crept in like a cold fog, and he breathed deep. The darkness settled over him, and he welcomed it.

Ash's head whipped forty-five degrees to the right and he saw not stars, like the stories liked to say, but double of everything in reverse as the ground rose to meet him instead of the other way around. The mud did little to break his fall, and his hip took a beating without armor to protect it. The skin on his cheek split and bled where Surge's ring cut through the skin after the fourth or fifth punch.

"Get up."

Ash winced and cupped his cheek. "Why, so you can hit me again?"

Surge glared at him through his aviators. The sun was at its zenith over Cerulean, though to Ash it seemed as though days had gone by and not mere hours.

"Until you learn how to fuckin' dodge or block me, then yeah."

Ash spit blood from his mouth and pushed himself up on his elbow. "Some teaching methods you got."

"You learn best when you memorize all the shit you did wrong so you don't do it when it counts. That's how I learned, and it's how you're gonna learn."

Ash struggled to his knees in the swampy mud and wiped his mouth on his already soiled sleeve. "Ever consider maybe it's not the best way to learn? I feel like my jaw's gonna fall off, shit."

"You ever consider you'll be in worse shape in a fight where your enemy actually *wants* to kill you? Whatcha gonna do then, huh? Ask for a time out? Whine like a baby? Get your ass up and come at me. I told you before, war ain't about winnin' so much as stayin' alive long enough to be the last man standing. So stand the fuck up."

Ash got to his feet, panting. Pikachu wasn't here to help him, and Surge had expressly forbidden him from using any other Pokémon. Only Haunter's ghostly presence remained within him, dormant. He stared down Surge, who had barely broken a sweat all day. It was faint, perhaps a trick of the light, but a golden hue flickered around him, like he stood before a bright light. Ash squinted and held up a hand to his eyes, not trusting them.

He musta hit me harder than I thought.

"Good," Surge said. "Now, hit me if you can."

Ash swallowed the pain in his face and took off at a jog. He picked up speed and ran at Surge, who crouched in anticipation. Ash pulled back a fist and Surge raised an arm to deflect, but at the last minute, Ash feinted and lashed out with his elbow. He caught Surge in the abdomen for half a second before an iron grip closed around his arm and threw him bodily to the side. Without thinking, he lashed out with his other hand and raked through something more solid than air.

A mouthful of mud was his reward for falling yet again. Deep within, Haunter stirred and whispered secrets in dead languages Ash could never hope to understand.

"Don't," he managed after spitting out the muck in his mouth.

The Ghost remained agitated within him, but it didn't emerge. A meaty hand closed around Ash's arm and hauled him up like he weighed nothing at all.

"Better," Surge said.

Ash's eyes widened at the long, bleeding tracks in Surge's shoulder. Blood seeped into his wife beater, but Surge barely noticed it.

"I'm sorry," Ash stammered.

"Don't be. I didn't expect your double feint. That was good instinct." He paused and regarded Ash's soiled face. "You move without thinking. Can't say I know many Mediums, but I did fight one once. This crazy bitch from Hoenn, heard she's one of their Elite Four now. She fought like she was on acid, like you. You pull shit outta your ass, and somehow it works most of the time. Not *all* the time, and that's your problem, but I'll say this—no one's gonna see you comin'. We could use that against Team Rocket."

Despite the ache in his face and the shredded skin under his nails, Ash grinned. "Thanks."

Surge grunted and released him. Ash nearly fell over before he caught himself.

"Again," Surge said.

"Again," Ivy said.

Gary eyed the knife in her hand—a switchblade, small but deadly—and wiped the blood from the cut on his face. His own switchblade lay in the damp grass where she'd knocked it from his hand. He bent down to pick it up, keeping an eye on Ivy as she circled him.

"You're too easy to read," she said. "I can see you coming a mile away."

"Why don't you put down the knife? Then it won't matter if you see me coming."

She smirked. "Why don't you put it down for me? If you can."

She moved like a trick of the light, fluid when she dodged but hard and ruthless when she jabbed. The knife was as much of an extension

of her as the scars she carried around. If he'd ever doubted her story before, he couldn't anymore after watching her up close like this. Gary clicked his knife closed and put it in his pocket. Ivy narrowed her eyes, but said nothing.

He cracked his knuckles. "Okay, then."

He lunged, hands loose and elbows tucked in close to his body, and only closed his fist when he was close enough to slug Ivy in the face. Her switchblade reflected the light as it arced underhanded, and he was forced to turn. The blade ripped a hole in his T-shirt and nicked his skin, but it was shallow. Ivy rolled with his punch, but he managed to graze her jawline. Not missing a beat, he kicked his leg around and caught her in the shin. She grunted in pain, but fell to the side and cartwheeled over him out of the way. They were at a standstill with Ivy crouched low on the ground ready to bolt and Gary on his feet, panting.

"Geez, kid," Violet said, walking over. "You move like a Bellator. Where'd you learn your footwork?"

Gary wiped his mouth and nose on his sleeve and sniffled. "What's a Bellator?"

Violet sighed. "Forgot, this is all still new to you guys. Bellator is a Tamer class, specifically the guys who prefer Fighters." She made a face. "The ones I've met're all pretty handsy and slow up here," she tapped two fingers to her temple, "but they can sure as hell fight like none other. It's pretty incredible to watch them, actually, so long as you're not the one on the other end of their fists."

Ivy stood up and closed her switchblade, which Gary still had not managed to knock out of her hands. "I'm guessing it's not normal for a Clairvoyant to mimic a Bellator's fighting style."

Violet shook her head. "It's not normal for a Clairvoyant to fight at all. Not that you have a choice in this instance."

The two women watched Gary expectantly, and Ivy put her hands on her hips.

"Anything you wanna share?" she said.

"It's not a secret that I trained in Johto for a year."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Huh, kinda shitty when when someone won't be straight with you, isn't it?"

Violet pursed her lips together. "Well, I'll leave you to it. Brock and Misty are working with their Pokémon, so join us when you're done out here and get some actual training in."

Gary and Ivy held their staring contest until Violet had disappeared inside the Gym once more.

"What're the fuck're you doing?" Ivy said. "Cut the crap already."

Gary shrugged. "You wanna know about my year in Johto, and I don't feel like talking about it. It's as simple as that."

"You're the one who said no more secrets. I held up my part of the deal."

"And you're the one who said you didn't care about what I did in Johto. Why the sudden interest?"

Ivy opened up her switchblade again and slashed it in an arc across her body. "Alright, be that way. I'll just have to cut it out of you!"

She came in swinging, and Gary was forced to backtrack to avoid her armed hand. He reached for her wrist, but she expected that and smacked him away with her other hand. Gary abandoned the plan and twisted away from her. He swept his leg out in an arc, but this time Ivy was ready and jumped. Using his momentum, he swung his fist around in a mean uppercut that caught her in the same place on her jaw as his last punch. If he'd had the time, he would have marvelled at the way she let the punch slide up her face, avoiding the brunt of the blow. Realizing his mistake too late, Gary only saw the flash of metal when she brought her switchblade down near his face.

But the blade never struck him, and he got an eyeful of her white-knuckled fist and the butt of the knife. His back hit the ground with a hollow thud, and Ivy straddled him before he could roll her off. Cold steel pressed against his throat, and he dared not swallow.

Furious blue met stunned green as she hovered just inches over him, pinning his legs with hers and applying just enough pressure to his throat to discourage retaliation. Her breath came in short, pronounced bursts and mingled with his. They stayed that way, suspended, for several moments. He gripped her arms in his hands.

"Good thing you kissed me before," he said. The blade nicked his throat where his Adam's apple rubbed against it when he spoke, and a thin line of blood trickled down the side of his neck. "Kinda looks like this time I really will die."

She blinked, and the ire faded from her eyes. Her gaze flickered down to his lips and then to the blade she held at his throat. The pressure on his throat eased some.

"You goddamned idio—"

He caught her by the back of the neck and, careless of the knife in her hand, pulled her down in a bruising kiss that cut her off and took her by surprise. She dropped the blade, and it drew a thin scratch along the side of his neck as it fell to the ground. There was mud in her hair and blood under the nails he raked through it.

She scrambled to regain a better angle against him, but he held fast and bit down on her lower lip. The pain made her hiss and he took opportunity to deepen the kiss until a sharp pain in his stomach knocked the wind out of him and caused him to spasm.

Ivy rolled off, fist clenched, and quickly got to her feet. Gary winced and managed to get to his knees while one arm held his middle protectively.

"What the hell?" he demanded. "I thought you wanted—"

"Shut up. We're in the middle of a fight."

He got to his feet, still clutching his middle, and held out a hand to fend her off in case she decided to lunge at him again. "*That's* what you want?"

Her mouth was slightly ajar, and her lower lip was swollen and turning red with the beginnings of a contusion. Her lips curled up in a smirk as she sized him up. "Afraid I'll beat your ass again?"

The pain in his middle had subsided enough to be tolerable, and he resumed his fighting stance. "You can't if you keep your distance."

They circled each other, and with each step the sounds of the world around them blended together in an unintelligible din. Ash's training with Surge, Misty and Brock duking it out in the Gym, the squelch of muddy water underfoot, the still and stagnant air, all white noise. Only her sharp intake of breath broke through the droning and

spurred him into action.

He came at her with a left hook, and she ducked under it to get at his stomach. He brought his knee up to catch her in the jaw, but she rolled with it and sidestepped him completely. A backhand caught him in the temple, and she never stopped moving. Gritting his teeth, Gary swept out with his leg, waited for her to jump, and hooked an arm around her knee, throwing her off balance and forcing her to roll on the ground. He was waiting with a punch, but his fist ate mud when she rolled to the side and leaped to her feet.

A broken branch sat next to where his fist had punched the malleable ground, and he swiped it up and threw it at her. Ivy's eyes widened and she turned her back. The branch hit her shoulder, and Gary dove after it. She deflected his punch to the back of the head with her wrist and twisted around to slug him in the face. She never made it, and her fist hit his palm with a loud smack.

Locked in a stalemate, she was close enough to make out the faint scars Meowth had painted down his face. But instead of the fury he'd seen in her eyes before, they sparkled with vigor.

"Eyes open," she said.

He blinked and looked down to where her knee was perfectly positioned to kick him in the balls if he so much as breathed wrong.

"...I hate you," he said.

"Sure you do."

All of a sudden she went slack in his grip dug her nails into his shirt. Before he had time to worry about the future trajectory of her knee, she yanked him forcefully down into another crushing kiss that sent his head spinning. Teeth tugged at his lip in rhythm with her wandering fingers that pulled fruitlessly at his soiled shirt, searching for the bare skin underneath. There was no room for clarity, for thought, for any consideration even of what the hell he was doing in broad daylight letting her push him around with sharp knives and persistent fingers. There was just the moment in a way he'd never felt it before.

His hands found her waist and the hem of her black tank top, which dragged up happily and without a fight as he kissed her back. But just when he got a good hold on her, she flattened her palms against his chest and pushed him away with all her strength. Shock and the

dizziness of the moment cost him an ungainly stumble, and his foot splashed in a pool of water, soaking him to the knee.

She had retrieved her switchblade while he reoriented himself and now wielded it backhand. Her navel, smeared with his finger tracks in dirt and a little blood, peeked out from where he'd hiked up her shirt.

"Again," she said.

Damn, pesky woman.

But he met her blow for blow until he couldn't take anymore, and they picked each other up out of the muck, one foot at a time, until it was their Pokémon's turn to train.

For the next seven months they would stay together, best friends turned rivals and the girl who'd landed on their doorstep with secrets better left unsaid. One foot at a time.

12. Celadon City, Part 1

Triumvirate, chapter 12: Celadon City, Part 1
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Lily could barely keep her excitement contained as she gazed over the ship's port bow at the fast-approaching Fuchsia coast to the east. Pikachu perched on her shoulder and squeaked happily, sensing its master's good mood.

"There it is, ChuChu," Lily said over the whipping sea breeze that blew back her long, blonde ponytail. "Wow, the beaches are actually fuchsia just like the guidebook says!"

Fuchsia City loomed ever closer as the ship neared the harbor. The surrounding waters were known for harboring the world's largest colony of Corsola ever discovered, and it was the sheddings from their coral horns turned to granular dust that ended up mixed with the sand on the shores and dyed them stunning shades of pinks and purples. Farther beyond the beach lay the city itself with its traditional, wooden buildings topped with hidden roofs, slanted eaves, and the occasional pagoda. Temples and shrines intermixed with residential dwellings and public buildings spoke to Fuchsia's entrenched devotion to lore and local religion centered around the ancient ninja clans that had once feuded over this land. Only one had emerged victorious and founded the Fuchsia that existed today.

"I wonder if we'll meet some real ninjas?" Lily asked Pikachu. "I mean, not that there's fake ninjas or something, but you know what I mean. That'd really be something. They must live such different lives from us, huh?"

Pikachu squeaked again and nuzzled Lily's neck. She smiled and scratched the yellow rodent behind the ear.

"Yeah, I know. We're here on business. But a girl can dream, right?"

"Ma'am, we're pulling into Fuchsia harbor," a burly sailor said.

Lily smiled brightly. "Great! I'll get my things."

Pikachu jumped down from her shoulder and chased after her as she jogged below deck. Within the next fifteen minutes, the ship had docked and Lily had her travel pack slung over her shoulder. The sea breeze was a little cold this far south compared to the balmier

Cinnabar climate, so she pulled her hoodie over her head to stave off the chill. She ran her fingers over the three Pokéballs at her belt and grinned.

"Well, time to get to work."

The crew got busy unloading, while Lily headed for Fuchsia proper. A woman had been waiting for her at the harbor to escort her.

"Welcome to Fuchsia City, Miss Kida," the woman greeted. She flashed a badge identifying her as a member of the local Police Department. "I've been asked by Dr. Santos to personally escort you to the site, where you can examine the fossil yourself. It's big, so we'll have to go to it, but it's not far. Everyone is waiting for your analysis, so please, follow me."

"Where exactly was the discovery made?" Lily asked.

The woman smiled and brushed one of her long, golden pigtails over her shoulder. "About half a mile out to sea, but they excavated the fossil and brought it to the Gym for safekeeping."

"The Gym? I hope they're using proper preservation techniques. Are you sure it's a good idea to keep it there?"

"Of course. The Gym Leader and his team of trainers are very capable. Dr. Santos didn't want to jeopardize such an important scientific discovery by leaving it unguarded."

They walked along the narrow, cobblestone streets and Lily took a moment to admire the architecture. Most structures in Fuchsia were no more than three stories tall, but they hid creatively manufactured rooms suspended over each other within single stories, giving the buildings the illusion of greater space and privacy. Windows were stacked at angles over and on top of each other, like someone had smashed the tops of the buildings down and crammed everything closer together.

"Come on, now, we should hurry up and get to the Gym."

Lily looked away from the one-way windows, feeling invisible eyes on her back. There were people out and about running errands, but they paid her and her escort little attention. When she focused on the woman leading her again, the road looked different. A glance over her shoulder showed no sign of anything even remotely familiar. The city was an open-air labyrinth, and already there was no way to orient

herself vis-a-vis the shore.

"Um, where are we? I feel like I just walked into a maze."

The woman laughed. "I know the feeling. Fuchsia can be confusing. But don't worry, I know exactly where we're going."

They rounded a corner, and the sound of running water under the street drew Lily's attention. Vapor rose from the vents in the ground, but instead of clean and white it was tinted grey. Lily wrinkled her nose at the acrid smell.

"Are you sure about that?" she asked.

Pikachu sneezed and buried its nose in Lily's neck.

The woman looked back at her and smiled. "Of course. Look, here we are."

They had arrived at a large, squat building broader and more lavish than any other building in the vicinity. Its hand-carved wood panelling was painted a majestic indigo trimmed with gold, and a placard at the door read 'Gym'. Twin weathered, stone statues of fearsome Arbok coiled to strike sat on either side of the main entrance. Her escort led her inside, and Lily wandered into a foyer leading to a hall lined with sliding shoji screens. The hardwood floors chirped with each step, nightingale floors that alerted the Gym's occupants to intruders. The corridor opened up ahead into an outdoor rock garden, where an old man meticulously tugged a bamboo rake through the sands. He looked up when he heard the nightingale floors chirping, but paid Lily only a passing glance. The sands in the garden were a magnificent blend of whites, pinks, and purples, much like the coastline, while large boulders sat at intermittent locations in the sand. One was cracked down the middle and revealed a sparkling, magenta geode crystal within bigger than Lily was tall.

"Right this way." The woman indicated one of the shoji doors on the left and opened it for Lily.

"Hey, I don't think I got your name. You said you work for Dr. Santos, right?"

The woman closed the door behind them. "It's Cassidy," she said. "But I don't work for Dr. Santos. Actually there isn't even a Dr. Santos here."

The room Cassidy had shown her to was small, and five men sat at a

low table on the floor in the middle. They all wore matching, black uniforms and white gloves. At the sight of Lily and Cassidy, they stood up and ceased their conversation.

Lily swallowed, and Pikachu began to spark at her shoulder. "But you said before that he asked you to bring me to the site. He's the one who contacted Cinnabar Labs with the discovery."

Cassidy chuckled softly behind her. She laid a hand on Lily's shoulder and squeezed. "The Dr. Santos you were expecting doesn't exist. And neither does his brilliant discovery."

The men's uniforms were embroidered with small, red R's on the left breast. The bright coloring drew Lily's wary eye.

"I don't understand."

"Not very smart for a scientist," one of the men with a cheap dye job said. "Cassidy, you sure this is the right one?"

Cassidy tightened her grip on Lily's shoulder to a painful pressure. "I was *thorough*, Butch. The Admins wanted the cute blonde with the Pikachu. This is her—"

"Thunderbolt!" Lily shouted before Cassidy could finish.

Pikachu leaped into the air and exploded with energy that tore apart the paper-thin door and drew gaping splinters down the lengths of the walls. Cassidy screamed in pain and fell back. Her entire arm had suffered a direct electric burn, and she clutched it to her chest.

Lily went for the Pokéballs at her hip, but something heavy rammed her so hard she went flying and crashed through the destroyed shoji door and into the room across the hall. A wooden table broke her fall and knocked the wind out of her. Pain exploded in her back where the split wood pierced her skin through her hoodie and drew blood.

"ChuChu!"

A humanoid figure lumbered after her, but she heard it before she saw it. Arrhythmic clicking and a wet, sucking sound followed her into the empty room, and she struggled against pain and fear to sit up among the destroyed table debris. A Pinsir stepped through the ripped shoji screen and fell to its six legs. The two pincers that extended from its jaw were as long as her arm, and they aimed directly for her. Gasping, she rolled to the side to avoid death by bludgeoning and dropped the

Pokéball she had been going for. It rolled across the floor to the wall, out of reach.

Another flash of lightning burst across the hall, but it was cut short and followed by a loud smacking sound. Lily's heart leaped into her throat as she struggled to her feet, tears in her eyes.

"ChuChu!"

"Restrain her!" Butch ordered.

Three men came at her, and she grabbed the nearest object she could find and swung with all her might. The splintered table leg slammed into one of the guy's heads and snapped his neck to the side. He crashed into the wall and crumpled to the ground, groaning and bleeding profusely from the wound in his head. Lily had no time to recover and aim again when another of the black-suited men slugged her hard in the face. She fell with a muffled gasp of pain, and a booted foot kicked her hard in the stomach.

"That little bitch, I'll *kill* her," Cassidy said.

"Can't do that yet, remember our orders..."

The voices faded and her senses faded with them as a frightful oblivion sucked her under. The last thing Lily saw was Butch picking up Pikachu by the scruff of its neck, but the vision blurred with her tears until all that was left was empty darkness.

Two armored titans clashed together and tore the earth apart underfoot with their weight. They pushed against each other with all their might and then some, locked in an almost evenly matched test of strength.

"Throw it," Gary commanded.

Nidoking roared and gave into the pressure just long enough to catch its opponent in the belly with its massive bone horn.

"Take him with you!" Ivy shouted.

Nidoking flung Tyranitar into the air in a truly impressive display of levered power, but the green Armor Pokémon swiped with its thick claws and cut through Nidoking's protective shell. Blue energy erupted from Tyranitar's fingertips as the Dragon Claw hauled Nidoking off

balance and dragged them both down. The tremor that reverberated when they hit the ground disturbed the wild Poliwag and Magikarp hiding in the swamp, and they scattered in fear to deeper waters.

Gary didn't miss a beat and threw another Pokéball. "Get in there!"

In a flash of light, a massive, orange canine as tall as Gary himself at the shoulder roared to life, followed by the sleek, violet feline that had until now remained by Gary's side.

"Dark Pulse!"

Tyranitar's jagged scales throbbed with black energy that sloughed off it in waves as it powered up the devastating attack. Gary narrowed his eyes and focused on Espeon, whose forehead jewel burst to life with a red glare. Ivy followed his line of sight and swore as she reached for another Pokéball at her belt.

Without verbal command, Espeon and Arcanine divided and split the arena. Espeon exploded in blue light as it leaped onto Nidoking's shoulder and bathed them both in a mystical aegis just as Arcanine spewed a thick stream of fire from its toothy maw. Tyranitar released its attack and blew Arcanine back just as the Legendary Pokémon was upon it. Gary ducked down to cover his face as the dark energy washed over him and drew bile into his throat. Only Espeon's well-timed Safeguard protected him from the debilitating effects of the negative energy, but Arcanine wasn't so lucky.

Mud and swamp water erupted in a thirty yard radius around Tyranitar and dragged Arcanine with it. The big canine, soiled and groggy, nonetheless got to its feet and snarled as it awaited its next command. Ivy tossed another Pokéball and Wigglytuff materialized among the flash of light. It immediately hopped to Tyranitar's side and stuck its nose in the air, long ears flat against its back.

"You wanna play the annoying, silent type?" Ivy taunted. "Then let's play."

Gary said nothing, and his Pokémon once again moved of their own accord in formation. Nidoking got down on all fours, and the poisoned quills on its back began to quiver in preparation for a Pin Missile aimed for Tyranitar. Espeon darted forward and powered up a brilliant, silver beam of psychic energy.

"Blast 'em!" Ivy shouted.

Tyranitar's deafening roar struck tangible horror and foreboding into the trainers' very bones, and it got down on all fours with its tail slashing the air overhead. Wigglytuff leaped up onto the massive dinosaur's back and scampered to the back of its head where together, they fired off twin Hyper Beams that jetted like lightning bolts and cracked the air and the earth alike where they hit. They obliterated Nidoking's Pin Missile and reduced Espeon's Psybeam to diffuse light. One nearly hit Arcanine directly until it took off in a blur of blinding speed.

"Shit," Ivy swore, reaching for another Pokéball.

Arcanine was too fast, though, and rammed Tyranitar in the side with Extreme Speed, knocking the green behemoth off-balance and making an opening for something much worse.

"Mega Kick!"

Wigglytuff, exhausted from its Hyper Beam attack, nonetheless rolled off Tyranitar's back and smacked Arcanine in the jaw with its powerful hind leg and sent the canine tumbling. A flash of light across the arena was Ivy's only warning before a deadly Metal Claw cleaved the swampy ground between Wigglytuff and Tyranitar.

A tall, red Bug buzzed as it beat its translucent wings and kicked up bits of mud and cattail puffs. Its massive pincer gleamed like polished steel under the afternoon sun, and Tyranitar growled in fury at the threat. Without direction from Ivy, it began to power up another Hyper Beam.

"Tyranitar, stop!"

She threw another Pokéball and Houndoom sank into the wet marsh just in front of Tyranitar. The black canine's exposed bones began to leak dark energy and it snarled in warning despite its small stature and lean frame compared to Tyranitar. Ivy jogged to her Pokémon.

"Misty will kill us if we tear her Gym apart."

She put out her arms and glared up at the insolent Pokémon. Unwilling to injure its master, Tyranitar swallowed the Hyper Beam and lowered its head to her eye level. Tentative, Ivy patted a hand on its broad snout, while Houndoom growled low in its throat at her side with the threat of fire and smoke among sharp teeth. Tyranitar calmed down, but its yellow eyes were trained on Scizor and Gary, who'd joined his lead Pokémon and put a hand on its claw to stay it.

A few tense moments passed where Ivy maintained contact with Tyranitar. She ran her hand over its nostrils, waiting for its breathing to even out. "There you go," she said, smiling. "It's just practice."

Tyranitar grumbled low in the pit of its belly as she continued to scratch its snout, and its sinister eyes began to dilate and droop.

"Good job," she whispered before recalling Tyranitar to its Pokéball.

"That was close," Gary said.

Ivy took a deep breath and glared at him over her shoulder. "You *know* Scizor and Tyranitar are natural enemies. You didn't have to send it out."

Next to Scizor, who was armored to the teeth and of a height with its trainer, Gary appeared lean and gaunt. "If I hadn't, Tyranitar could've killed Arcanine."

Ivy rubbed her eyes. "They're getting too stir crazy here. They need real action. Blood. Pokémon like Tyranitar, Scizor, and Arcanine can't just stay in this sandbox forever."

Gary nodded and recalled Scizor, Nidoking, and Arcanine to their Pokéballs. "Then maybe it's time for us to think about heading to the next Gym. It's been more than half a year."

Ivy put a hand on Houndoom's horned head and scratched it behind the ears until it began to pant happily. "Yeah, I was thinking the same thing." She gave Gary a weird look before adding, "Or did you already know that?"

He rolled his eyes. "I've told you, it doesn't worklike that. Espeon's the Psychic one, not me."

"But you're still telecommunicating commands to your whole team through it. It's annoying. I can't tell what you're gonna do next."

He smirked and put a hand around the back of her neck, pulling her face close. "That's sort of the point."

Her eyes fell to his lips. "You know what?" she whispered against them.

His thumb ran along her temple as he attempted to angle her face upward, closer. "What?"

"You're a real jackass."

Before he had the chance to pull her in for a kiss, she slipped out of his hold and kneeled down to pick up Wigglytuff, who was more than happy to be out of the water.

"Oh my god," Misty said, jogging into the main arena. "This place is a *mess*! What'd I tell you guys about getting out of hand?"

Gary and Ivy exchanged a look. "Uh, sorry?" Ivy said.

Misty crossed her arms. "It's fine. I just hope the Poliwag and Magikarp come back soon so they can fix up the marsh.

"That reminds me," Gary said. "Where's Ash?"

Misty rolled her eyes. "Don't ask me. He ran off in the middle of the night. *Again*. I feel like I need to chain him to the bed sometimes."

"Ash doesn't strike me as the type who'd be into that," Ivy said. "Gary, what do you think?"

Gary scowled deeply. "I think that's the last thing I *ever* wanna think about."

"Anyway," Misty said. "I came in here to tell you guys some bad news, actually. I think you better clean up and come with me—"

Misty got cut off when a great roar echoed from outside. Wigglytuff buried its whiskered nose in Ivy's shirt.

"Sounds like Ash is back," Gary said, heading for the door.

"Oh, sure, *now* he comes back."

Ivy recalled Houndoom and Wigglytuff and put a hand on Misty's shoulder. "If you want to chain him down, I'd be happy to assist."

Misty blushed like mad, and Ivy couldn't hold back a laugh.

"That's *not* funny."

"It's kinda funny."

They followed Gary outside where Ash had just landed. He was dismounting Charizard, who barely restrained a growl even as Ash loosened the leather saddle strapped to its back. The orange lizard

stood a good nine feet tall on its hind legs, and its leathery, blue wings spanned more than double that from tip to tip. Ash patted it on the neck, and Charizard belched acrid, black smoke tendrils from its nostrils and between its filed teeth.

"Cool it," Ash said calmly as he finished removing the saddle. "You can go eat now."

Charizard snorted and lifted off into the sky once more in one powerful beat of its wings. In a matter of seconds, it was soaring north to Route Twenty-Five to hunt for its dinner.

"Ash Ketchum," Misty said, hands on her hips. "Where the hell have you been?"

Ash paled. "Uh, hey, Misty." He eyed Gary and whispered, "What'd I do now?"

"What *didn't* you do?"

Pikachu squeaked happily and jumped onto Misty's shoulder. But she barely acknowledged Pikachu with more than a brief scratch on the side of its face as she got in Ash's face and pushed his chest. "You left in the middle of the goddamned night and didn't even say anything. I woke up, you were *gone*, and I had no idea what was going on. Sound familiar?"

"Oh, right... Hah, well, there's a perfectly good explanation for that."

"And I just can't wait to hear it."

Ash sighed. "Look, I'm sorry I didn't say anything, but it was just another quick run to Lavender to check in with Mr. Fuji. It was just some Ghost stuff, nothing to worry about. I knew I'd be back in a few hours, so I didn't wanna wake you—"

"You've been gone all day and night! God, Ash, it's not like I'm asking for the world or something. I just wanna know if you suddenly feel the need to fly off into the night so I don't wake up thinking the worst. In case you forgot, you're on Team Rocket's shit list and they wouldn't hesitate to take you out if they caught you alone on one of your midnight runs."

Ash grinned and wrapped an arm around her waist before she could get away. "Sorry. Forgive me?"

Misty relaxed a little, but when she leaned in to peck Ash on the cheek, she came face to face with glowing, red eyes and a cheshire grin full of sharp, yellow teeth. A frigid hand wiggled shadowy claws at her face, and she screeched and stumbled backward. Pikachu leaped from her shoulder to avoid falling.

"How many times do I have to ask you to keep that thing under control?" she said, panting in fear.

The Ghost laughed maniacally and manifested in its full, humanoid form among billowing, violet mists next to Ash.

"Aw, Gengar was just having a little fun," Ash said.

"There's nothing *fun* about getting scared half to death every time I try to get close to you." Misty rubbed her temples and glared at the cackling Ghost. "Besides, I think it resents me or something."

Ash frowned. "What? No way."

Gengar frowned dramatically and put up its hands like it didn't deserve this suspicion. Misty averted her gaze, still unsatisfied, and crossed her arms.

"Whatever, I still don't—aack!"

Gengar wrapped its amorphous arms around her shoulders in a ghastly hug that only succeeded in sending icy tremors down her arms.

"Hey, cut that out," Ash said, reining the Ghost in.

Gengar cackled and floated next to Ash, nodding vigorously.

"Oh, that's *it*. You keep that thing *away from me* or else."

Ash winced. "It was just trying to give you a hug. C'mon, Misty, you know Ghosts like to mess around."

Ivy snorted. "Tell that to the ones that killed all those people in Lavender."

"That was different," Ash defended. "You know it was."

"Whatever," Gary said. "Misty, you said you had something to tell us?"

Misty rubbed her bare arms, which had prickled with gooseflesh

thanks to Gengar's prank. "Ugh, yeah, I do. You're gonna want to sit down for this one."

The trio exchanged a look, but Misty didn't wait for them and headed for the living area of the Gym.

"Looks like someone's gonna be sleeping on the couch tonight," Ivy said with a smirk.

Ash rolled his eyes. "It was just a few hours, for cryin' out loud."

Pikachu squeaked as though to confirm Ash's story while it trotted along beside him.

"Dude, that's not even close to the point," Gary said.

"Oh, so you're saying if Ivy ran off for a few hours in the middle of the night, you'd freak out?"

"He'd never notice I was gone," Ivy said. "I'm that good."

"While that's not the *point*," Gary said, "yeah, I'd feel weird about it. Like it or not, this is still the world we live in. Cerulean may be safer than most places, but Team Rocket's still got it in for us. A little warning can go a long way."

"But you know I'd rather disturb your beauty sleep and drag you along with me."

Ivy smiled brightly and Gary stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"So you think I shoulda brought Misty? We can't both fit on Charizard, though."

"That's not the *point*," Ivy and Gary said at the same time.

"Ugh." Ash pulled off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. "I thought the hard part was *getting* the girl, not keeping her happy."

Gengar ran its gaseous claws through Ash's hair, but they passed right through his head and accomplished nothing in the way of taming Ash's hat hair, much to the Ghost's chagrin.

Ivy gasped. "Wow, a girl who isn't a prize to be won and actually has expectations about a relationship? *Shocking*."

"Ugh, c'mon, you know that's not what I meant."

They arrived in the living area of the Gym, and Misty was at the kitchen filling up a glass of water. Gary and Ash sat down together on a large, leather sofa, while Ivy took the loveseat and crossed her legs akimbo. Espeon curled up on Gary's lap and began to purr as Gary scratched it behind its large ears. Pikachu took a seat in between the boys, while Gengar took on a more solid form and walked along the backrest. It's half-formed skeleton floated along inside it, like the disjointed globules within a lava lamp. When it wandered too close to Gary, though, Espeon's ears twitched and it looked up with a hiss. The Ghost wriggled its curved talons at the violet feline, but dared not venture any closer.

Misty returned with a half-full glass of water and took a seat on the recliner at the head of the coffee table. "There's no easy way to say this, so I'm just gonna say it. Remember how Saffron imposed those exorbitant export tariffs last year? Well, I've been getting complaints from local merchants that now, Saffron's cut off *all* trade. Nothing's getting in or out."

"What? Since when?" Ivy demanded.

"Since last week. I haven't heard anything from Vermilion yet, but I doubt it'll be long before Surge hears about it, too."

"Shit, so what does this mean for Cerulean? For the other cities depending on Saffron's exports?" Ash asked.

"It's not a huge problem for us as far as natural resources go ever since we agreed to the alliance with Pewter and Vermilion. Lavender's Power Plant and Radio Tower are bringing in a steady income to the town, too, so this won't be as devastating as it would've been a year ago.

"But Saffron's home to Silph, and they're the tech kings. Without Silph merchandise, Lavender can't get the machinery it needs to maintain the Power Plant, Vermilion can't get the equipment it needs to continue its construction industry, and I won't have a way to fix up our irrigation system when it has problems. Every city relies on Silph technology in some capacity or other. That's just the surface of it."

"Any idea why they've suddenly closed all their doors?" Gary asked. "That seems sudden and unprovoked."

Misty shook her head. "No idea. There was no warning or announcement like when they raised the tariffs. It's like the whole place has gone dark. I sent some scouts out to survey Saffron a couple

days ago, and they returned this morning. All they had to say was there was no way to get close to Saffron. Something's protecting it, some kind of barrier."

Gary narrowed his eyes. "Sabrina's a Clairvoyant, and it's safe to assume her Gym trainers are all Psychic specialists. I wonder if they could be working together to have their Pokémon erect a giant Barrier. It would explain why no one can get close or get in."

"A Barrier? Is that even possible on such a scale? We're talking the biggest city in Kanto," Ivy said.

"I don't think it's impossible. They'd have to have some frighteningly strong Pokémon maintaining it, though."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Misty said. "No one fucks with Sabrina or Saffron. That's always been understood."

"Then the question is, *who* pissed her off enough to cause this?" Ash said. "I don't like the smell of this."

"Ash, remember back when we came through Mt. Moon and you said you saw Silph equipment in the abandoned Chimera lab?" Ivy said. "I know we dismissed that as coincidence since Silph's the only game in town, but now I'm not so sure we should've."

"No way," Misty said. "A Gym Leader under Team Rocket's thumb? That's insane. Sabrina, of all people, would never let someone tell her how to run her city."

"Team Rocket can be very persuasive. Gym Leaders are just people."

"Regardless," Gary said, "we still don't have any concrete proof either way. We can't bust in under false assumption. That's the kind of attitude that'll get us killed."

"Guys, I think we're missin' the most important question here."

Everyone turned to Ash and waited for him to elaborate.

"What's that?" Misty asked.

He held her gaze with hard eyes. "Whether that Barrier's to keep us out, or to keep something else inside."

"Or some*one*," Gary said. He shook his head. "There's too many unknowns."

"Then we need answers," Ivy said. "Psychics don't scare me."

"A whole army of them should."

"There may be someone who can help," Misty said. "Well, 'help' being a relative term."

"Who?"

Misty sighed. "Remember I mentioned awhile back that Erika, the Celadon Gym Leader, had a long-standing feud with Sabrina?"

"You think Erika would know what's happening in Saffron?" Gary asked.

"I think she makes it her business to know what's happening with the only threat to Celadon's economic dominance on the mainland. If anyone can shed some light on what's happening and why, it's definitely Erika."

"Great, then we go talk to Erika." Ivy got up and stretched. "Been wanting to get back to the Gym Leader recruitment mission, anyway. We have to finish what we started."

"Listen, guys," Misty said. "Erika may be an entitled princess, but she's shrewd and she doesn't take any crap from anyone. She runs the wealthiest city in all of Kanto and Johto. You shouldn't underestimate her."

"And she's a Tamer," Gary added. "Which means we'll need to be very cautious."

"Erika's got a private army of Pokémon trainers and ex-military that defends Celadon and its gold mines. If you want to talk to her, you're going to need to be smart about this."

"An army, huh?" Ash said with a grin that Gengar mimicked atop his shoulder. "That's interesting."

"We have three Gym backings," Ivy said. "That's gotta count for something."

"I wouldn't bet on it. Like I said, Erika's a spoiled rich girl. The rest of us are...beneath her." Misty made a sour face.

"Either way, it doesn't matter. We can't leave without her support and until we figure out what's going on with Saffron. Whatever it takes,

we'll convince her."

Gary stood up and Espeon stretched out on the floor with a yawn that exposed thin but sharp fangs. Its dark eyes blinked sleepily up at its trainer.

"So, when do we leave?" Ivy asked.

"Tomorrow morning." Ash stood up and Gengar resumed its semi-solid state to float alongside him. Pikachu stretched out on the couch it now had all to itself and snoozed. "No point in putting it off."

Ivy spared Misty a glance. She'd gone quiet and clasped her hands in front of her, but didn't get up from her chair. Ivy skipped to Gary's side around the coffee table and looped her arm around his.

"Well, we reek. And Arcanine and Nidoking need to stop at the Pokémon Center."

Gary nodded. "Right. Ash, you com— *Ow*!"

Ivy stepped on his foot and started dragging him toward the door. "Catch you guys later! Dinner, maybe? Okay, bye!"

Once they were outside the Gym and out of earshot, she let him go.

"What the hell was that about?"

"Oh, like you even have to ask."

Gary stuffed his hands in his pocket and waited.

"Seriously? You're pretty dense for a guy who's s'posed to be psychic."

"For the *last time*, being Clairvoyant doesn't mean I have ESP."

"Well, that's too bad because it might've helped you pick up on Misty's murder mood when Ash suggested we leave first thing in the morning."

Gary frowned. "What's wrong with that? This isn't something we can wait around for."

"Oh, god." Ivy pinched the bridge of her nose and glared down at Espeon. "We're surrounded by idiots."

The feline swished its split tail and tilted its head in question.

"What, you're saying Misty was sad? She knows how dire the situation is."

"Yeah, but we all know she has to stay here and look after the Gym and Cerulean. Who knows when we'll see her again? And if we're being honest, who knows if we'll make it through this to see her again?"

Gary put a hand on her shoulder. "That's not a question."

"It is for someone who won't be there with us every step of the way."

His gaze fell. "I guess you're right."

Ivy's lips curled into a devious smirk. "I'm sorry, what was that? I don't think I heard you."

He sneered and stalked off toward the Pokémon Center with Espeon in tow.

"Hey, speak up!" Ivy chased after him. "Was that you just admitting I'm right?"

"...Pesky woman."

She laughed, and they headed into town together.

In the pale moonlight that cut through the night, the bare curve of Misty's smooth hip was a feast for Ash's eye. He traced the line of her from thigh to waist to the curve of her breast. Unable to wait any longer, he flipped them over and pinned her below him on the bed. She gazed up at him with half-lidded, blue eyes that sparkled even in the dead of night. He ran his hand over her collarbone, marveling at the translucent, blue flames that came away from her skin like she was on fire. They surrounded her like a second shadow, so bright in his twilit eyes yet invisible to her.

"What is it?" she said.

He bent down to kiss her collarbone and slowly trailed up her neck. "You don't know beautiful you are."

She grabbed his hair and kissed him properly as they rolled among the sheets, desperate for more contact. Her palms were hot against his bare chest and back as she pulled him closer still, and he gave her

what she wanted. The sheets surrounded them in all the softness of gentle, ocean waves, beating them farther out to sea where Ash was happy to drown with her, if just for a little while.

As they lay in the dark and the hum of peace slowly ebbed from their tangled limbs, the midnight songs of the wild Poliwag filled the outside air with a sweet longing. Fireflies danced beyond the one-way glass separating Ash and Misty from the outside world beyond. He followed their erratic paths with his eyes.

"Dawn's in a few hours," he said softly. "I still need to pack."

Misty's hold on him tightened. "Don't spoil this, Ash. Not tonight."

He rested his forehead against hers. "I wasn't trying to. But... You know how this has to go."

Misty sighed and rolled onto her back. "I hate this."

Ash shifted onto his elbow and looked down at her face. "I do, too. That's why I have to leave. Put an end to Team Rocket once and for all. It's not like it'll be like this forever."

"You know what *is* forever? If you die."

Ash laughed. "Don't worry, Agatha said Mediums live way longer than everybody else. So you don't have to worry about me."

Misty let out a sharp breath and turned on her side so her back was to him. "There you go, turning this into a joke the way you do with everything. It's *not* a joke, it's your life."

He frowned and ran a hand down her arm, noting the goosebumps that rose along it in his wake courtesy of Gengar's latent Aura within him. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that."

Misty said nothing for a while, and Ash got up. He fumbled around for his pants, discarded in a hurry on the floor, and headed for the closet where his old traveling pack was stashed.

"So that's it?" Misty said. "You're just going to pack up your life and go like it's no big deal?"

Ash tossed the shirt he'd selected on the floor with his pack and faced her. "I dunno what you want me to say. I have to leave. There's no way around it."

"I know that. I'm not asking you to stay."

"Then what *are* you saying?"

"I just want you to *want* to stay. Isn't that obvious?"

Ash headed back to the bed and sat on the edge in front of her. "What difference does that make? I still have to go, and you still have to run the Gym and protect Cerulean."

Misty sat up in bed and slipped off the other side. She stalked around the room and threw her clothes on in a haste.

"Misty, c'mon, talk to me. Why're you so mad?"

"Seriously? You have to ask?" She finished pulling on her sleeping shirt and put her hands on her hips. "What's the matter with you? Do you really not get it?"

Ash stood up and approached her. "Not if you don't explain it to me."

She laughed, but it wasn't out of amusement. "You know, when we met, I thought your carefree, never-say-die attitude was one of your better qualities. I still think that in a lot of ways. You see the world differently, like you can do anything, even when you find out you can't. You always find a way, even if it means doing the impossible. You've never been one to betray yourself or what you believe in.

"But this," she gestured in between them, "isn't something you can just decide on your own is gonna work and expect that it will. I need something more than that."

Ash grabbed her arms and searched her eyes. "Then what? What do you want? Just tell me and I'll do it."

"You idiot, I'm trying to tell you I love you, and I want you to love me back. Enough to wish you didn't have to leave, to admit that dying's not an option because *I'm* here waiting for you."

Ash stared at her, stunned speechless. "I..."

She pulled out of his grip. "Forget it. I shouldn't have said anything when it's obvious you're not ready."

She went back to the bed and got under the covers to go to sleep. Ash stood there for a couple moments, reeling, until a familiar, ghostly presence bubbled up from its dormancy within him. He growled and

pushed it back down before turning back to Misty.

"Hey, I'm glad you said something," Ash said. "I just... It caught me by surprise is all."

"That's kind of the problem. This shouldn't be a surprise to you, Ash."

"What's *that* s'posed to mean?"

Misty sat up in the bed again and looked him in the eye. "It means for practically the whole time you've been here, you've had one foot in this relationship with me and one foot way the hell out there, literally and metaphorically." She pointed outside. "Ever since Surge left, you spend all your time solo training on Route Twenty-Five. I barely see you during the day at all."

"Yeah, because I can't exactly let my Pokémon run around in your Gym. They'd destroy it."

"You run off at all hours of the day or night to Lavender Town, sometimes for whole weeks at a time without any explanation or warning."

Ash pressed his lips together. "It's important, you know that. Ever since the Radio Tower fiasco, Fuji hasn't been able to get in touch with Agatha, so I have to help him out to stabilize the gravesite every so often."

Misty ran her fingers through her hair. "You up and volunteered to leave first thing in the morning for a mission that could very realistically kill you like you didn't even care!"

"Care? Of course I care! We have to stop Team Rocket, but I wanted to spend tonight with you—"

"*One* night with no warning at all after you absconded to Lavender last night. Ugh, you know, that doesn't even matter. I don't care if you have to be alone to train or if you have to go to Lavender all the time. I never wanted to get in the way of that, I know how important it is. The point is, I've felt like the only person actually trying to make this work between us for a lot longer than I'm happy admitting." She sniffled. "And the worst part is I still couldn't help falling in lo—"

She choked on a sob and covered her mouth. Ash wrapped his arms around her frame and pulled her close despite her weak struggling. She buried her face in his neck, and he smoothed her mussed hair

down her back.

"I'm sorry, Misty."

Her crying died down after a couple minutes and she pulled back. Those brilliant, blue eyes that had captivated him since the day she'd brought him back from the dead were puffy and tired now. Exhausted just looking upon him.

"I know you are. I really do. But...I just don't know if that's enough anymore."

She lay back in bed and showed him her back, and Ash sat there, unmoving. Gengar whispered within his consciousness, and in his wandering thoughts he wasn't able to ignore the Ghost any longer. Sighing, Ash rose off the bed and let Gengar materialize. The bipedal specter floated to the floor and assumed a roughly solid figure that came up to Ash's mid-thigh. At the sight of Ash staring in silence at Misty's prone form in the bed, it's usual grin drooped into a pronounced frown, and a wave of questioning worry thundered through Ash's body.

He bent down so they were at eye level and peered into the Ghost's lurid eyes. "Whatever it is," he said softly, "it's definitely my fault."

Gengar blinked, and another rush of emotion jolted through Ash—excitement, this time.

"Soon enough, buddy. I could use an excuse to let off some steam, too."

Gengar's yellowed grin reflected the moonlight, and it narrowed its eyes to dangerous slits. Dark plumes wafted from its horned ears and the poisonous quills on its back. Ash swallowed the insidious bloodlust with relative ease and glared at the Ghost.

"Save that for Erika."

He got up and returned to packing as the first rays of sunlight began to chase the night away. Gengar hopped to the window and gazed at the dawn, a slow laugh building and filling the room to Ash's ears only. Wide awake, he slung his pack over his shoulder and watched the transient twilight cast its haunted haze upon the city, unbeknownst to its sleeping denizens.

"It's time," Ash whispered.

Gengar leaped into the air and half dissolved into amorphous gas as Ash quietly exited the room. Behind him, Misty's aquamarine aura receded to a glowing hum, and she slept away.

Misty, Violet, Daisy, and Bill all gathered outside the Gym to see off the trio. It was early, and dew still beaded the swamp grasses and cattails while the sun's head remained weak against the morning fog. Outfitted with new and customized armor to combat their choice Pokémon's collateral damage, the trio said their goodbyes to Cerulean City and the people that had hosted them for the past seven months.

"I 'xpect y'all'll be prepared for just about anything that comes at you," Bill said as he shook Gary's hand. "You know the Pokédex backwards 'n forwards now."

"Your updates have been a huge help, Bill, thanks."

"Ladies, it's been a pleasure," Ivy said as she hugged each of Violet and Daisy.

"Sure you'll be okay with Tweedledum and Tweedle Dumber?" Violet said.

They all laughed.

"Please, like they'd be okay without *me*."

Ash and Misty stood to the side as they quietly said their goodbyes.

"Listen, Misty, about last night..."

She cupped his cheeks with her hands and searched his eyes. "I don't want you to leave for this mission on a bad note, but I meant what I said last night. All of it. And I'm not gonna stand here and pretend like I expect something you can't give me, okay? That's not the kind of person I am, you know that."

He put his hands over hers, and his heart sank. "Of course I know. I just don't know what to tell you. I mean, I..." He leaned in close. "I care about you a lot. More than I ever... I just never thought..." He frowned as he searched for the right words. "I guess I always imagined things would go slower. I feel like I'm still a kid sometimes."

"I know. It's okay, I get it. I just can't be happy about it."

"Are you...gonna be here when I get back?"

She smiled and kissed him gently on the lips. "I'll always support you no matter what happens, with Team Rocket and as your friend. But the rest depends on you, Ash. You already know how I feel about things. About you."

He took a shaky breath and closed his eyes. "Maybe I just need some time. Maybe... Maybe I just need to get this over with so we don't have to look over our shoulders anymore, and I can spend more time with you, like you want. It's just this last battle, once and for all, and when Team Rocket's gone, I'll be able to put it all behind me."

She ran her fingers over his lips. "I don't think there's such a thing as a last battle in this world. It just ends when you decide the wars aren't yours to fight anymore. And I think for you, that's a hard to decision to make. Maybe even impossible."

"Misty..."

She smiled, small but genuine, and his heart wrenched. "You know, I always loved that about you, though." She backed away and crossed her arms to give him a stern look. "So. You better bring back that armor. That's a brand new set, and it wasn't cheap."

He looked down at the gloves that fitted over his new, black armor. Unlike Gary's and Ivy's, his was specially lined with rubber to protect him from Pikachu's electricity. It was the best on the market, and Misty had spared no expense.

He tried to smile, but found he didn't have the heart to make it count. "Yeah, I promise."

They separated so Misty could say goodbye to Gary and Ivy, and Ash released Charizard's Pokéball. The irritable reptile snarled when it saw Ash and the leather saddle he had under his arm.

"Not today, Charizard," Ash said with an edge to his tone he usually reserved for the orange lizard.

Pikachu squeaked and leaped onto Charizard's back. Even now, Ash was at a loss for how Charizard tolerated the little rodent so easily when it had a stick up its ass about Ash himself, no matter how much time they'd spent together.

"Are you sure we can't walk? It's not like Celadon's that far," Ivy said.

"Absolutely not," Gary said. "You need to get over this vertigo crap. Your whole bird fear is totally irrational."

She crossed her arms and glared. "Watch it."

"I'm just saying, it doesn't matter what happened in the past. It's in the *past*. And it's not like every bird in the world is responsible. One day, you'll have to learn to get past it."

"Oh? And how do you figure that?"

Gary shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe you'll need to work with a bird one day, and freaking out could cost you your life. Who knows? Either way, it's not worth the risk, I know you know that."

She pantomimed his speaking with a sour look on her face, and Gengar cackled at Ash's shoulder.

Gary ignored her and threw a Pokéball. Aerodactyl emerged with a deep-throated squawk and fell to the ground on all fours, wings folded. It was now easily larger than Charizard with a thirty-five-foot wingspan and still growing. Its mature scales were cut like shale and just as tough. Charizard began to smoke and growl at the sight of the other flyer, eager for a chance to test its mettle against the Ancient Pokémon.

"Ready for some flying?" Gary said, patting Aerodactyl on the side of its short neck.

Aerodactyl squawked and hunched down to let Gary equip it with a leather saddle identical to Ash's, but it kept one, beady eye on Charizard.

"Well, it was worth a try," Ivy groused as she tossed out a Pokéball.

A massive, purple bat landed on the ground amidst the flash of light, towering a good seven feet tall from its stubby, hind legs to the tips of its wide, hairy ears. In addition to its powerful main set of wings, its secondary hind wings gave it the extra power that made it the fastest and most precise Flyer on the continent. Crobat was already outfitted with a saddle, and Ivy swung her leg over in one swoop and petted the big bat behind its ears. Unlike Charizard and Aerodactyl, the one-eyed Crobat was content to ignore everyone in the vicinity and await Ivy's command.

"If you need anything," Misty said to the three of them, "send a bird.

We can be in Saffron in a few hours and Celadon in a couple days on foot if necessary."

"We'll keep you in the loop," Gary promised. "Thanks for everything, Misty, Violet, Daisy."

"We'll give Her Royal Highness your best," Ivy said with a wink.

Daisy laughed.

"Y'all take care now," Bill said. "Any sign of trouble, you just holler. And keep fillin' out the Pokédex!"

"Are we ready yet?" Ash waited on Charizard's back with Pikachu settled in the saddle in front of him and Gengar hovering overhead.

Gary and Ivy exchanged a look.

"Yeah," Gary said. "Let's go."

Ivy smiled down at Misty one last time. "We'll be back soon, in one piece."

Misty nodded grimly. "I'm counting on it."

"Fly!" Ash commanded.

Charizard launched into the air on its powerful hind legs and beat its wings hard enough to kick up a geyser of muddy water in its wake. Pikachu squeaked and dug into the saddle horn with its small claws to hold on for dear life. Aerodactyl and Crobat followed just behind, and soon Cerulean City loomed several hundred feet below. The morning sun brought to life the natural blues and greens of the marsh water, stone fountains, and glass architecture, making the city glisten like a precious stone.

Ash angled Charizard due south, and the Pokémon's strong wings caught an updraft that carried them in a lazy arc higher. Aerodactyl swooped in to the left, and Gary signaled to Ash. Through his goggles, Ash squinted and made out Saffron in the distance, small against the horizon but fast approaching.

A short ways below, Ivy sped ahead on the lightning-fast Crobat, whose back wings gave it double the power of either Aerodactyl or Charizard in flight at almost no extra cost. She took the lead, and Ash patted Charizard's neck in encouragement.

In just a short hour of flight, they had reached the outskirts of Saffron City. Gary signaled for them to hold as they gave the place a wide berth. Gengar, who'd been trailing Ash like an exhaust fume enjoying Charizard's tailwind, disappeared within him and granted Ash access to its heightened sensing capabilities. Like someone had flipped a switch on the world, the skyscape came to life in an explosion of juxtaposed light and darkness.

Gary trailed a bright, white fog like a wintery veil too bright to look at for long. Up ahead, Ivy was the stark contrast. A dark aura cloaked her almost completely from sight, and Ash knew from experience that it shaded her eyes in shadow that was impossible to stare into without growing queasy. He swallowed hard.

This must be how Agatha saw them back in Lavender.

No wonder she'd been terrified.

"There!" Gary shouted over the wind.

Ivy signaled with an 'OK' sign up ahead, and Ash squinted beyond her. Sure enough, the Barrier Misty had mentioned glimmered in a wide perimeter around the entire city. It glowed with a faint, white light, and Gengar's whispers intensified.

"I know, buddy," Ash said softly, aware the Ghost could hear him regardless of the whipping winds. "That's a lotta Psychics."

Ivy redirected Crobat's trajectory and banked a hard right before coming to a complete stop in mid-air. Ash and Gary were forced to circle and await her appraisal. Crobat hovered expertly in place as Ivy reached forward and pressed a hand to the Barrier. Ash hissed and raised a hand to his eyes when Ivy's natural darkness collided with the Psychic energy, causing a tremor in it. Stygian veins leaked from her hand into the Barrier, but the aegis was so powerful that it dissipated the energy in a matter of seconds. Ivy settled back into her saddle and Crobat once more took off to level with Aerodactyl and Charizard.

"It's solid!" she shouted to each of Ash and Gary. "Definitely a Barrier!"

"Thought so," Ash muttered to himself. "So how do we get through it?"

Gary signaled for them to continue southwestward to Celadon now that they knew what stood between them and Saffron. Settling in for a long flight, Ash gave Charizard free reign of the sky and let the Pokémon soar at its comfort speed and altitude. Below, Saffron shrank

in the distance and gave way to the thick woods of Route Seven, which followed a small but undeterred river.

Cawing drew Charizard's attention, and the orange lizard huffed a thick cloud of smoke. A flock of Spearow and Fearow flew up ahead in a lazy cluster, with the five Fearow of the group taking the lead. Ivy had slowed Crobat down so she floated behind Gary in Aerodactyl's shadow, and Ash smirked. Gengar sensed his flutter of amusement after the emotionally turbulent night and morning, and eagerly capitalized on it with an echoing laugh in his head.

"Why the fuck not?"

He gave Charizard the reins and the pseudo-Dragon dove toward the birds. It scared the daylights out of a lagging Spearow and belched out a cloud of black smoke. One of the Fearow eyed Charizard warily, but it didn't bother attacking. Ash pulled out his Pokédex and snapped the giant bird's picture.

"Looks like they're more indifferent than afraid," he said, noting Fearow's lack of natural predators.

The Spearow flocked closer to their evolved leaders, however, and squawked angrily. Gary drew up with Aerodactyl and crept up as close to one of the massive Fearow as he could. Ash caught the grin on his face as he admired the magnificent birds, the rulers of the skies in every sense of the word.

Ivy hung back, however, and Ash pulled back on Charizard to level with her.

"Come on!" he shouted over the winds. "It's awesome!"

"No way!" she shouted back.

Ash frowned, but the chuckle in his head gave him an idea. "Give her a boost, Gengar."

The Ghost erupted in mirth and emerged from Ash to shoot after Ivy like a smoking bullet. She swore when she saw the Ghost coming and banked Crobat into a roll that shot her forward. When she ended up among the birds and shrieked, Ash burst out laughing. Gary angled Aerodactyl out of the way as Crobat deftly maneuvered among the tiny Spearow and ended up level with the Fearow at the front of the advance. One of the giant birds cawed at Crobat, but the purple bat barely noticed it and leveled off atop the air current. Ivy had gone

quiet in the saddle, now surrounded by Fearow that made no move to acknowledge her.

Ash watched as Gary maneuvered Aerodactyl to soar just under Crobat. From above, the grey reptile appeared like an ominous reflection of the graceful bat. The Fearow gave Ivy some space as she clutched Crobat's fur for dear life.

"You're okay!" Ash called from just above.

Ivy glared up at him and gave him the finger. He laughed and laughed, and Gengar laughed with him.

Escorted by the flock of Spearow and Fearow, the trio made it to Celadon after nearly seven hours of flying out of Saffron. They touched down in a rush of wind on the grass at the edge of the city near a lake that fed the river along Route Seven. The sun was low on the western horizon, and the air had taken on a slight chill. Beyond the city to the west, the vast expanse of Viridian Forest stretched as far as the eye could see and beyond to the far west all the way to the foot of the Indigo Mountains, where Indigo Plateau was nestled among them farther to the north.

Celadon itself was a bright spot along the vast treeline, a bustling metropolis home to hundreds of thousands of people. Skyscrapers loomed a hundred feet high, office buildings and shopping malls and botany research centers. Celadon was the beacon of agricultural technology in Kanto, as well as the continent's central bank and gold supplier. And one woman stood at the helm of this great city.

Charizard, Aerodactyl, and Crobat helped themselves to a well-deserved drink from the lake after the long flight. When they were sated, the trio recalled them to their Pokéballs and headed for the city's outskirts. Gary released Espeon and Ivy released Umbreon to lead the way in the encroaching darkness. The two felines trotted alongside one another, uncanny allies despite their natural typing enmity.

"That wasn't cool, Ash," Ivy said.

"Huh? Oh, the bird thing? I just wanted to show you they weren't gonna do anything."

She rubbed the back of her neck. "I get that, but it still wasn't cool. Look, I know you guys think it's silly, but you didn't go through what I went through."

"Maybe if you tell us what happened, we'd understand," Gary said.

Ash tilted his head expectantly.

Ivy crossed her arms. "I don't wanna talk about it."

"You know, Ivy, I know it's none of our business, but what happened up there? It was pretty amazing. Who can say they've flown with wild Fearow and lived to tell about it? When you really look at them, they're just so regal. Like, how can something so big fly like that? Like it's nothing?"

"Sometimes it helps to talk about it," Gary said softly. "It doesn't mean we can fix it, but we can listen."

She hugged her arms to her chest and fell silent. No one breached the silence as they approached Celadon's checkpoint and flashed their Trainer IDs for admittance. When they got to the bustling main street, Ivy stopped all of a sudden.

"It's not what you think," she said. "It's not that I don't *wanna* talk about it."

"Then what is it?" Gary asked.

"You just wouldn't believe it if I told you."

Ash chuckled. "C'mon, we believed you about Team Rocket even though that sounded crazy back then. What makes you think we wouldn't believe you now?"

She shook her head. "You don't understand. It's... Sometimes I don't even know if it was real myself. Like I have to be crazy to remember it the way I do." She looked up, gaze hard. "But I know what I saw. I'll never forget it."

Gary approached her. "Tell us."

She set her jaw. "Fine. You remember how I said I was abducted by the Masked Man when I was a kid, right? Well, I never told you how that happened."

"What, he used a bird?" Ash said.

"Not just any bird." She paused and took a steadying breath. "Ho-oh, the legendary Rainbow Phoenix."

"...Wait, what? You're serious?"

"Ivy, Ho-oh's a myth," Gary said calmly. "You were really little when it happened, right?"

"Yeah, but I know what I saw. I'm telling you guys, it was Ho-oh for sure. Don't ask me how the Masked Man's got a legendary bird on his team, but he does, I swear he does."

Ash and Gary exchanged a look, and Ivy scowled.

"See, this is why I didn't wanna tell you. I knew you wouldn't believe me."

Gary grabbed her arm before she could get away. "Hold on, I never said I didn't believe you. It just...seems impossible."

She yanked her arm free. "Aren't you the one who told me legends necessarily have to be possible?"

"...Yeah, but the guy who told me that was just asking me to believe in them, not that they could walk into my life at any moment. It made sense when he said it, and I thought he had a point."

"Well, so do I." She put up her hands. "Look, I'm not asking you to believe me, but don't look at me like that. I *know* it was Ho-oh, and it doesn't matter what you guys or anyone else says."

Ash tapped his chin. "Say it *was* Ho-oh. How'd that guy manage to catch one? Can you even catch a legendary bird? I thought they were s'posed to be all-powerful."

"They're just Pokémon," Gary said. "Any Pokémon can be caught. They're just...really strong Pokémon. And really big. A normal Pokéball probably wouldn't come close to holding all that in. All the legends revere them as legendary because our ancestors couldn't even process how powerful they were. You fear what you don't understand."

"Or deny it entirely," Ivy quipped.

Gary shot her a look. "Point taken. Now, are we talking to Erika or what?"

"Yeah," Ash said. "And I'm doing the talking and whatever else she wants to do."

"Ash, it's my turn to face a Gym Leader," Ivy said. "You got the last one."

"Yeah, well, that was almost a year ago. I need this."

"Hey." Gary yanked Ash back by the shoulder, and they stopped outside a small restaurant. "Cool it. You're acting like our default is kill mode. That's not how we should approach this."

"I'm not. I just learned my lesson last time. These Gym Leaders need sense beaten into them, not talked at them. I'm just happy to oblige this time."

Ash pulled away and stalked off toward the city's center.

"Gary," Ivy said. "I dunno if you noticed, but Ash and Misty had a rough goodbye. That's probably why he's upset."

"I don't give a shit what happened, he just better not let it interfere with our business here. This is serious."

Ash walked on ahead with Gengar and Pikachu. Even the tempting smells of roasting food wafting from the streetside restaurants didn't tempt him as he maintained one goal in mind.

This is the last one, he thought to himself. *Once Team Rocket's gone, that's it. I'm done, Misty. I promise.*

Celadon was a densly populated concrete jungle of a city. The financial district alone was a sprawling expanse of skyscrapers and people in suits running to dinner meetings or scrambling for last minute deadlines. Ash garnered more than a few odd looks for his combative attire and Pokémon companions, but no one impeded his progress. Signs on the street corners pointed the way to the Gym, the center of the city, and he jogged onward with Pikachu in tow. Gary and Ivy trailed behind with Espeon and Umbreon.

The expansive city took Ash the better part of an hour to cross on foot, and that was less than half of the entire place. Farther beyond, the suburbs lay to the south and west, picturesque, nearly identical houses and long stretches of green where solar-powered greenhouses grew all manner of crops and purified the city's drinking water. If he had the time, he may have stopped to admire the citizens' ingenuity in terms of self-sustenance.

But he didn't have time, and it was already twilight's second coming

today. Ash cast the western horizon a glance, where Viridian Forest swallowed all traces of light and warmth. Unbidden, he was struck with an image of Pidgeotto back when it was a Pidgey chick, and his mother had brought it home after she found it foraging for seeds in her garden. It had fit in the palms of her hands, such a little thing, and Ash had marveled at the cooing bird.

A wave of sadness passed through his frame, and he shuddered. Gengar peered at him through the gloom, its bloody eyes alight in the twilit dusk.

"Sorry," Ash muttered. "Just an old memory." He steeled himself and held out an arm for Pikachu to jump on. The Celadon Gym was an enormous greenhouse housing a forest that obscured the interior among fleshy leaves and thick trunks. "Let's do this."

He headed inside just as Gary and Ivy caught up to him and caught their their breaths. "Ash, hold up!" Ivy said. "Goddamnit."

"C'mon," Gary said. "We can't let him do anything rash."

Ash found the double front doors open and slipped inside the Gym. Immediately, he was hit with a thick, perfumed wave of hot and humid air. It was a literal jungle inside, replete with hissing Ekans lazing in the tree branches and Bugs buzzing around overhead, pollinating the exotic flowers. Ivy flipped open her Pokédex to snap a picture of a butterfly-like Pokémon sucking the nectar out of an enormous tiger lily flower.

"Huh, no information."

"I think that's Beautifly," Gary said. "It's a Hoenn native, but it's a cousin of Butterfree."

Ivy punched in a few lines of text to make a note of the foreign Pokémon before continuing after Ash, who'd wandered deeper into the indoor rainforest.

"Gym Leader Erika!" Ash said as he wandered the dirt path. "I need a word with you!"

With the Aura vision his Mediumship granted him, Ash caught the faintest of movement among the thick palm leaves, but he detected no glowing Tamer's aura. An insidious tremor racked his spine as Gengar sensed something he didn't.

"I know you're there," he said. "Trust me, you can't hide."

A tingling sensation at his back made him turn, but there was no one there. Gary and Ivy had fallen behind in the thick vegetation, but he could make out Gary's scintillating aura through the thick of it.

"Be ready," he whispered both to Pikachu and Gengar.

Despite the situation, Ash could not help but admire the radiant flora that filled this place. Aside from the lush trees, almost none of which he'd ever seen before, there were flowers of every shape, size, and color imaginable growing on the ground, creeping up tree trunks, and hanging from the canopy overhead. Butterfree and Beautifly floated among them, cross-pollinating as they feasted on the flowers' nectar. Running water nearby ended up being a small but healthy stream. Goldeen swam just under the surface feeding on vegetation at the bottom. Oddish, Bellsprout, and Bulbasaur gathered near the water's edge to drink and soak up the heat from heat lamps positioned several feet off the ground. The entire Gym was a self-contained oasis in the middle of a highly developed, man-made metropolis.

Movement once more alerted Ash to the presence of others, and this time he lashed out with an Aura-laced hand at the nearest vegetation. The leaves he sliced through shriveled, browned, and cracked as the life was sucked out of them under his ghastly touch. Unwilling to wander around any longer, he leaped after the presence he'd detected and ran through the thick jungle off the path. He didn't have far to go when someone thwacked a spear at him. Only Gengar's heightened perception gave him the forewarning to duck in time. Losing his balance, he rolled to the side and dug his shadowy claws into the earth. The grass around him rotted to a brown pulp, and he crouched on his hands and knees.

"What on earth?"

The woman who'd attacked him wore finger-painted camouflage on her bare skin and a burlap dress smeared with mud and grass stains. She blended in perfectly with the jungle environment. And she wasn't alone. Four other women, similarly dressed, emerged with spears and knives and a small army of Grass-type Pokémon to converge on Ash. Two Gloom let their mouths hang open and dripped pearlescent saliva that emitted an odor so rancid, Ash's eyes began to water. An Ivysaur unleashed its vines and awaited its trainer's command to attack.

"What are you?" one of the women said, teeth bared and eyes

narrowed to slits as she stared at the rotted grass surrounding Ash like a black halo.

Pikachu began to spark, and Gengar's whispers in his head grew louder and crueler.

"I'm here to talk to Erika," Ash said. "Where is she?"

"You can't come in here and make demands like you own the place," another woman wielding twin daggers said. "Insolent brat."

Ash slowly got to his feet and tapped into the depths of Gengar's Aura. Violet light cloaked his body and rose off him in ethereal flames. The women gasped and held their ground at the eerie sight. He reached out a talon-cloaked hand toward them.

"Erika. I have business with her. *Now*."

A whistling sound behind him was his only warning before another camouflaged woman leaped out of the brush behind him and slashed with a machete. Ash leaped into the air and glided high over the women's heads with Gengar's assistance. Light as a feather, he landed several yards away. The tulip patch he landed in withered and turned to dust at his feet. With Pikachu on one side and Ash and Gengar on the other, they had the women surrounded.

"Okay," Ash said. "I guess I'll start asking with something stronger than words. Pikachu."

The yellow rodent began to spark in warning.

"Stop," a woman's voice said. "Call off your Pikachu."

Ash looked around for the source of the voice, but saw nothing incriminating. "Not until I talk to Erika."

"*I* am Erika."

Her voice came from everywhere at once, and Ash looked around for the source. Microphones? He couldn't see any from where he stood.

"Then come out and face me."

She laughed. "And why would I do that? You break into *my* Gym, pick a fight with *my* trainers, and on top of it all, you have the gall to make demands of me? You have *no* idea who you're dealing with, little boy."

Gary and Ivy burst through the underbrush just then and recoiled at the sight of the jungle women on their defensive.

"Ash, what the hell?" Ivy demanded.

Erika laughed again. "And you brought guests. Presumptuous, aren't you?"

Gary kneeled down and petted Espeon. He caught Ash's eye. "There's another Tamer here for sure. I can feel her."

"If you don't show yourself, I'll burn this entire place to the ground," Ash said.

Ivy pointed to Ash's left through the gloom. "There, I see her."

"No," one of the Gym's women said. "Lady Erika!"

Ash followed Ivy's line of sight and took off in a single, weightless bound into the dark grove. The forest parted under his decaying touch, and sure enough, another figure waited up ahead along with more of the camouflaged female trainers flanking her. Ash landed a few yards before her in an open area of the indoor jungle where the stream made its headwaters and split into two forks. The camouflaged women raised spears and swords against Ash. The woman behind them, though, arrested his attention.

Unlike her trainers, she wore a full, black kimono painted with magenta and violet petals. Her glossy, black hair was pulled back in an intricate, braided bun and bangs framed her pale face. She stared Ash down with every confidence possessed of someone in power, someone very sure of her own position relative to that of others. Dark eyes narrowed at Ash not in anger or defiance, but in scrutiny over her straight-edge nose.

But most striking of all was the flaming, verdant aura that rose from her like smoke.

"Erika, I take it," Ash said. "You must be. You're the only other Tamer here."

Erika's red-painted lips curled in a smirk that sent a spike of cold dread down Ash's spine. "A Medium," she said. "I thought I smelled something putrid in my Gym."

Gary and Ivy soon joined Ash with Pikachu, Espeon, and Umbreon in

tow. The female trainers surrounded them and caged them in with their spears.

"Ash, what is she?" Gary said.

"Sylvan," Ash said. "She uses Grass-types."

Erika laughed. "Look how proud you are of your knowledge." She stepped forward, and the women parted to let her pass. "You think you can come in here half-cocked like I'll bend over backwards for whatever absurd demands you plan to make of me? Little boy..."

Ash held his ground, but there was something in Erika's demeanor, the way she carried herself, that set him on edge in ways even Agatha hadn't managed to do. She looked at him like he was naked for all the world to see, and every part of him, body and soul, displeased her.

"I don't give second chances. So you're going to learn the hard way why *I'm* master of this Gym and the most respected city in all of Kanto."

"Wait!" Ivy shouted. "Erika, we just came because we need to know what you know about what's happening in Saffron with Sabrina. We're not here to start trouble!"

Erika's glance flickered to Ivy and Gary briefly. "Sabrina..." She reached for two Pokéballs at her obi and tossed them. "Don't *ever* speak that name in my presence!"

When the light faded, a squat Vileplume stood next to a hulking Exeggutor that was easily as tall as Tyranitar. Its three heads grew disjointed from one another out of its rough, bark-covered body. Super-hardened eggshell protected the Pokémon's soft, jaundiced faces like natural helmets, and fleshy palm leaves topped its heads like an ostentatious crown. Exeggutor stomped one of its trunk-like feet and shook the ground. Vileplume remained absolutely still and silent next to it as a thick, magenta vapor leaked from its flowering head.

"You're going to learn how I don't tolerate *any* insubordination in my Gym." Erika pointed directly at Ash. "Solar Beam."

Exeggutor's crown of palm leaves began to glow with absorbed energy from the verdant jungle all around it, and it opened its three mouths impossibly wide. The Solar Beam exploded in a fantastical display of superheated light and hurtled straight for Ash.

The crick in her neck became too unbearable to tolerate any longer, and Lily jerked awake with a gasp. Her eyes were dilated, and it took her a moment to adjust to the lighting. Her cheek stung, and she touched her fingers to it. Dried blood was caked around a gash on her temple, but it was her back that ached the most. Wincing, Lily sat up on the floor and leaned against the wall.

Her first thought was of her Pokémon, but the Pokéballs she usually kept secured to her belt were gone, and there was no sign of Pikachu. Panic threatened to overcome her, but her analytical mind buzzing with questions won out for the time being and she forced herself to breathe.

One thing at a time.

Amber eyes, now adjusted to the light, peered around the room she'd been confined to. The walls were stacked with boxes, and an old, stainless steel desk was shoved against the far wall piled high with coffee-stained papers, books, and a flickering lamp that needed a new bulb. The floor was concrete, and there were no windows.

Basement, then.

The basement of what? She crept to the edge of her cell and gripped the metal bars that confined her to one corner of the room. Squinting, she tried to make out the red, stamped writing on the boxes.

"You're awake."

The voice made her jump, and she nearly fell over. Someone was slumped in the corner of her cell in the shadows. She hadn't even noticed him when she came to, and now she pressed herself against the wall as far away from him as possible. She had no weapons and no Pokémon, and she was a small woman at only five feet tall. A palpable shiver of fear ran down her spine as she peered through the gloom at the man half hidden in the shadows. All she could make out was light skin and one steely, grey eye that flickered with the broken strobe lamp.

"W-Who're you? What is this place? Why am I here?"

The man watched her in silence for a few moments, and Lily swallowed hard. "Do you realize that when you ask so many questions, you're giving people an easy excuse to ignore all but the last one?"

She blinked a few times, but he didn't take his eye off her as he waited. "Well, I, uh, I have a lot of questions. Which is understandable given the...circumstances. Why're you sitting there so nonchalant, anyway?"

"Another question. Do you have a preference for the order in which I answer, or may I speak freely?"

Lily frowned. "Um..."

"As for what this place is, I have a feeling you already have an idea given how you were looking around before. Why you're here is an easy deduction given that information."

When he didn't go on, Lily let her shoulders slump. "...Judging from the writing on those boxes over there," she indicated the stacks across the room, "I'd say we're in a storage unit for Silph. As far as I know, they don't store small parts outside their headquarters for trade secret reasons, so we must actually *be* at their headquarters in Saffron." She paused. "Which means someone brought me here all the way from Fuchsia while I was knocked out."

"Very good."

"Wait, were you taken from Fuchsia, too?"

"I haven't finished answering your other questions, and now you're posing another. Do you see what I meant about giving your opponents an easy opening to withhold information?"

Lily bit the inside of her cheek. "I guess it's in my nature to ask questions."

The man's lips curled in the beginnings of a smirk. "And there's the answer to your question about why you're here."

Lily looked him in the eye again, mind racing. "No. I'm a paleogeneticist. My specialty is dead things, not technology."

"Isn't it technology that gives you the power to revive those dead things?"

"How do you—" She cut herself off before she could voice the question. Instead she said, "You're pretty well informed."

"Good," the man said. "Now you're shifting the onus to me to

contradict or defend. It's harder for me to lie that way."

Lily clenched her fists. "You're dodging the point."

That got a laugh out of him. "I am. But instead of boring you with a list of credentials or half-proofs you wouldn't believe anyway, I'll just answer your original question. Then you can decide for yourself."

He got up from the floor and stood up to his full height, nearly a foot taller than Lily.

"My name is Steven," he said, stepping out of the shadows.

The fluorescent, overhead lamps in the room cast wan light across his angular face and mussed hair, a grey so deep it was nearly cobalt. There was a sharpness to him that cut through the air directly to her as he cast his calculating gaze upon her, absorbing so much and giving away little more than the heavy gravity around him. The armor he wore was scuffed and darkened with old blood in places. When he held out a hand for her to shake, there was dirt under his fingernails and old scars on his palms.

She accepted the hand in a daze, and he revealed too-white teeth and a grip that could have crushed solid rock.

"Steven Stone."

13. Celadon City, Part 2

Triumvirate, chapter 13: Celadon City, Part 2
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Ash barely had time to throw the Pokéball he'd grabbed in his haste to get out of the way of the killer Solar Beam. The powerful shaft of light blinded him and everyone else in the Gym, and he crashed to the ground.

But pain never came beyond the mild sunburn that now dusted his cheeks. Pikachu chittered frantically, and Gengar spilled out of him to take on a more solid form. Struggling and still seeing stars, Ash got to his feet and glared at Erika across the clearing.

Snorlax stood in between Exeggutor and Ash on its hind legs, which had dug into the ground and created two small craters. Its thick, fatty girth smoked and charred with the effects of the incinerating Solar Beam, but the blue bear-like Pokémon had taken the direct hit and still stood, unfazed.

"Wake up, big guy," Ash said. "Time to fight!"

Snorlax blinked its beady, brown eyes and growled as it peered around. A staggering fifteen feet tall, the heavyset Pokémon lurched forward and roared loud enough to scatter the Gym Pokémon hiding in the brush. Ash covered his ears to the sound, teeth bared in a snarl.

"Now we're fucked," Gary said once the racket died down. "That thing could kill us all if Ash loses control of it."

"So, you believe you've tamed a Snorlax," Erika said. "That's both dangerous and stupid."

"Tell me that when I've beaten you. Body Slam!"

Snorlax grunted and lowered its head to charge forward and ram Exeggutor.

"Reflect," Erika commanded.

A mystical, yellow wall of light materialized in front of Exeggutor just as Snorlax made contact. The giant Pokémon collided with a thunderous smack, and the Reflect screen sparkled and cracked in between them. It was enough to keep Exeggutor standing after the

direct hit, and Erika didn't miss a beat.

"Petal Dance!"

Vileplume made a thrumming sound as the massive flower on its head began to bloom and shed razor sharp, fuchsia petals that swirled overhead in a vortex, gathering speed and momentum.

"Tear it apart, Gengar!"

The Ghost, giddy, leaped forward and dissipated into a mass of violet miasma and a gnashing skull. It expanded and dove straight to the heart of Vileplume's attack, withering the weaponized petals that passed through it to get to Snorlax.

"Exeggutor!"

But when the behemoth Pokémon broke to regroup, Exeggutor's six eyes began to glow with silvery light that gyrated the very air around it in visible waves.

"Ash, look out!" Gary shouted.

The Psychic attack slammed into Gengar and scattered it with a shriek. Ash swore as Vileplume continued to kick up more petals to replace the ones Gengar had rotted.

"As if I would open myself up to type disadvantages," Erika taunted. "Do you take me for a *simpleton*?"

Ash ignored her as he scanned the Gym area for anything he could use to his advantage. In the meantime, Vileplume released Petal Dance and aimed directly for Snorlax. The razor sharp projectiles tore through Snorlax's thick fur and fat, drawing red lines all across its bulky belly and arms. The big bear bellowed in anger and pain, swiping at the petals with its meaty paws and slashing through any within reach. Dark smoke gathered near Snorlax's feet, and Ash had an idea. He glanced briefly back at Ivy and Gary and took a deep breath.

"Gengar, help Snorlax!"

The Ghost's familiar grin parted as it rose from the ground and stole the surrounding flora's life with it. Gengar resumed its corporeal form and alighted on Snorlax's broad shoulder.

"Erika, I came here for answers about Sabrina and Team Rocket," he

said. "If you're not loyal to either, then there's nothing to fight about!"

"You should have thought about that before you dared to strut in here and usurp my authority! Double Solar Beam!"

Vileplume scampered on all fours to Exeggutor's feet, and together they began to draw energy from the jungle around them. Ash watched as Erika herself stood with her feet shoulder-width apart, and her jade aura seeped into the grass underfoot, joining with her Pokémon.

"Give 'em everything you got!" Ash shouted.

Snorlax, now shaking in fury over its injuries, opened its large mouth and began to charge up a devastating Hyper Beam. Gengar's cheshire grin widened, and it sank its taloned hands into Snorlax's skull.

"Ash, no!" Ivy screamed as she tried to get past Erika's loyal trainers.

But it was too late. Exeggutor and Vileplume combined their energy into a staggering Solar Beam that plunged the arena into a white-hot stupor just as Snorlax unleashed Hyper Beam. An explosion of light and heat sent a wave of static energy snapping through the air. The grass at Ash's feet became instantly invigorated before shriveling to brown husks. He barely had time to hear Erika's cry of shock when the light died down and an indigo Hyper Beam slammed into Exeggutor, sending it crashing through two tree trunks before the nine-inch glass marking the wall of the Gym stopped its trajectory and cracked. The Shadow Ball-laced Hyper Beam pummeled the Coconut Pokémon without mercy, and only due to its small stature did Vileplume narrowly escape the cruel assault.

The entire sequence lasted only six or seven seconds, but the damage was done. Erika screamed, her warrior trainers scrambled, and Ash reached for Pikachu just as the cracks in the walls made it to the ceiling and shattered a twenty-foot expanse overhead. Glass shards as long as an arm rained down upon the people and Pokémon below just as Ash scooped up Pikachu and fell to one knee.

Silence. There was no telltale shattering, no bloodcurdling cries of agony, no foul stench of death that should have accompanied the ceiling's collapse. Ash breathed a sigh of relief and looked up with a grin. The glass shards floated, surrounded by blue light, just inches above Snorlax's head. Gengar reached out to poke one, but recoiled in surprise upon contact with the Psychic energy encompassing them.

"Ash, you *dumbass*!" Gary said.

Espeon and Golduck squatted together on all fours, pulsing with telekinetic energy as they focused on keeping the glass shards suspended a safe distance over everyone's heads. Slowly, the two Pokémon gathered the pieces and set them safely on the ground in a pile, one by one.

Ash got up and smiled back at his teammates, but he was met with a slug in the face that made him see stars for the second time that night. Ivy panted and shook out her hand while Ash clutched his abused jaw.

"Ow!"

"Don't you fucking 'ow' me," Ivy said, her tone dangerously low. "You could've killed us all."

Ash rubbed his jaw, and Pikachu sniffed him in concern. Slowly, he righted himself and faced her. His grin hadn't fallen, and she narrowed her eyes in fury.

"Nah," he said. "I knew exactly what I was doing."

Erika had rushed to Exeggutor's side to assess its damage now that the threat to her trainers and herself had been assuaged. The big Pokémon's bark-covered body was cracked and bleeding green, and it was passed out from bloodloss. She recalled it to its Pokéball and bent down to pick up Vileplume, running her fingers through its soft flower crown and searching for damage. Satisfied, she recalled Vileplume and marched toward Ash with her warriors flanking her.

"Erika—"

She pulled back a fist and slugged him across the other cheek, sending him stumbling. Gengar and Pikachu rushed to his defense.

"You... You son of a bitch," she spat. "Never in my *life* have I witnessed such a callous display of temerity. On top of everything, you wreck my Gym, too? Do you have *any* idea how much the repairs will cost? If *anything* happens to Exeggutor, I'll see you thrown into the pits of the darkest dungeon I can find."

Ash groaned and rubbed his sore jaw, grateful neither of the women standing over him had broken it. "Ladies, please, there's enough of me to go around, apparently."

Erika's warriors brandished their weapons at Ash, but a low rumble from Snorlax drew everyone's attention. The giant bear ambled toward

its trainer, teeth bared and eyes shifting around the various bodies surrounding him. Panicked whispers erupted from Erika's warriors, and they herded Erika away from the big bear. Ash got to his feet and put up his hands.

"Whoa there, big guy," he said, wincing when it hurt to talk. "Easy."

Snorlax hunkered down on all fours, ears flat against its head as it circled around Ash and focused on the women surrounding Erika.

"Get your beast under control!" Erika demanded.

Snorlax growled again, oblivious to the char marks and bleeding cuts that painted its belly crimson. Ash positioned himself between Erika's women and Snorlax, arms outstretched.

"Stand down," he commanded with as much confidence as he could muster when his jaw felt like it would fall off. "We're done here."

Snorlax peered at Ash with dark, feral eyes, questioning, but Ash stood tall. Snorlax's mandible incisors protruded over its upper lip, slick with saliva and just inches from Ash's face as he stood between Snorlax and the target of its aggression.

Tentative, he brought his hand in and touched the big bear's wet snout. The women whispered behind him, but Snorlax allowed the contact.

"We gotta get you patched up," Ash said softly. "Then, a big dinner. You did good today, just like we practiced."

Snorlax growled low in its belly, and its wide paws dug into the packed earth and stone underfoot. Gengar once more floated over Ash's shoulder and grinned at Snorlax. After a few tense moments, Snorlax relented and plopped down on its rear, shaking the ground and making the women gasp as they readjusted their balance. Ash tapped a Pokéball to Snorlax's nose, and it disappeared in a flash of red light. With the immediate threat gone, the Celadon Gym warrior women once more surrounded Ash, Ivy, and Gary. Erika walked to the edge of the women's spears and swords and glared at the trio with unabashed fury.

"I don't know who you three are, or what possessed you to barge in here trying to prove...whatever *that* was. I have every mind to hand you over to the Police Department and recommend the maximum allowable punishment. In this case, death."

"Ex*cuse* me?" Ivy said.

"Erika, please," Gary said. "We don't want to cause you any more trouble."

"What the fuck do you call what just happened?" one of the warrior women said.

Erika put a gentle hand on the woman's shoulder. "It's fine, Lara. I'll handle this."

"Like *hell* it's fine! Erika, these people disrespected you, the Gym, and this great city. You can't expect us to let that slide."

Lara was painted and dressed like her fellow Gym trainers, but she was the opposite of Erika in almost every way. Her skin was a rich olive color, and her wild, curly hair hung about her shoulders with a life of its own. Fierce, green eyes glared daggers at Ash, and the short sword in her hand moved with such ease when she pointed it at Ash that it could have been an extension of her body.

Ash glanced askance at Gary, but his childhood rival gave him no reassurances in his cold stare. Rather, it was Ivy who stepped forward and spoke for the trio. She removed her glove and ran bare fingers over Lara's sharpened blade.

"You have a lot of anger," Ivy said. "I see that runs common in this Gym. You ladies don't take anybody's shit, huh?"

Lara bared her teeth and tried to shove her sword nearer to Ivy to get her to back off. But Ivy closed her bare hand around the blade and held the woman's gaze, unflinching. Blood slicked the blade and dripped to the earth from between Ivy's fingers. Ash stared, mesmerized, at the audacious display.

"Ivy," Gary said in warning.

She ignored him and shifted her gaze to Erika directly. "And you're the bitch in charge. Nobody crosses you and gets away with it, right?"

Erika stiffened and set her jaw. "Masochism doesn't impress me."

Ivy smirked, and Ash shivered at the sight. He hadn't seen that look in her eyes since they started their journey together, since she revealed her true motivations. The true darkness within, beaten and bred into her bones, that outshone the tendrils of night she emitted to his all-

seeing eye. Gengar sensed his hesitation and trembled behind him.

"This isn't impressive."

Without warning, Ivy tightened her grip on the blade and yanked it down. Lara, stunned, lost her grip and made it easy for Ivy to grab her wrist, twist it around, and slide her bloodied hand to the hilt of the weapon, turning it on the two women in the blink of an eye. Blood soaked the sleeve of her armor and dripped in thick globules from the base of her hand as she stared down Erika and Lara and the small army of warriors behind them.

"This is."

A tense silence stretched as the women sized each other up, but before Erika could say anything, Ivy lowered the blade and tossed it aside. Umbreon hissed beside her, the smell of blood causing it to raise its hackles.

"You know, in my experience I've found that redirecting my anger to the biggest target makes me feel fucking fantastic," Ivy went on. "The rest are superfluous. They're either in the way...or potential allies. It all depends on your perspective. Gym Leader Erika, are you the queen that mindlessly conquers for the sake of glory? Or the one who silently rules kings too focused on the other side's pawns to notice the weights gone from their heads?"

She raised her bleeding hand before her and licked the blood from her thumb.

Erika had gone still, her eyes trained on Ivy's injured hand. And when she spoke next, Ash was sure the women had pummeled him harder than he remembered.

"You remind me of her," Erika said. "Sabrina."

"I thought you made it clear you hated her," Gary said.

Erika smiled with those painted lips, lips the color of blood and burning. "Exactly. And that's why I've decided I'll hear you out." She let her gaze fall upon Ivy. "The only way to kill a monster is to send a bigger one after it."

Lara turned on her. "Erika, this is crazy. You can't—"

"*I* am the Gym Leader. And I can do *whatever* I want." She waved to

the shattered glass overhead. "I want that repaired by morning. I don't care how much it costs, just make sure it's done before it causes too much damage to the oasis. You three," she nodded to the trio, "will join me for dinner in one hour at my house next door. Do *not* be late."

With that, Erika waved them off and a group of the Gym trainers forcibly escorted them out of the Gym. Before Ash knew it, he was back outside breathing in the cool, evening air after the nearly suffocating humidity of the indoor jungle.

"How 'bout that," he said, scratching Pikachu's head. "That actually went pretty..."

Gary and Ivy were too busy making out like their lives depended on it to hear him. He had her by the hair but not as his mercy as she dug her nails into his back through his armor. Her bloody hand left smears on his reinforced shoulder pads.

"...well," Ash finished.

Sighing, he put his hands in his pockets and looked around. The Pokémon Center's trademark, carnelian roof caught his eye a few blocks to the north.

"I'll, uh, just head to the Pokémon Center for Snorlax. Feel free to join when you're through..."

They ignored him, too absorbed in each other. Gengar floated above him and Pikachu nuzzled his cheek, earning the yellow rodent a hiss of pain. Ivy and Erika had really punched his lights out without remorse.

"Violence as foreplay, huh?" Ash mused aloud to his two Pokémon companions.

Pikachu licked his bruising cheek, and Gengar poked at his hat, trying to yank it off to no avail. Ivy and Gary ended up tailing him to the Pokémon Center a good ten minutes later, out of breath.

Just under an hour since getting kicked out of the Gym, the trio stood outside Erika's 'house' west of the Gym, cleaned up but no less on edge. Ash's jaw and cheeks were splotched black and blue and swollen, giving him cheek proportions that rivaled Pikachu's.

"That's no house," Ash said as he stared up at the five stories of

painted wood and stone. "That's a goddamned *palace*."

"She's rich, after all," Ivy said.

Gary walked around in front of them with his arms crossed. "I wanna get one thing straight here. From here on out, Ash, you don't say a word to Erika. You don't even look at her. And you keep Gengar out of sight."

"What? Why?"

"You know damn well why. That display in the Gym? You were way outta line."

"Listen, if this is about the glass, I knew you'd intervene and stop it. It's not like I was actually gonna kill us all, c'mon."

"That's not the problem. You rushing in guns blazing and provoking a Gym Leader into a reckless fight, a Gym Leader we knew next to nothing about, is the *fucking* problem. What's the matter with you? This isn't like you at all."

Ash got in his face, and they stared each other down. "This is how I have to be. How we all have to be. Not everyone's like Brock and Misty. I thought you guys knew that by now."

"No, Ash, it's not how we have to be," Ivy said. "You were angry about what happened with Misty, and you let it get to you. You let it cloud your judgment and you took unnecessary risks with *our* mission."

He turned on Ivy and clenched a fist. "Don't drag Misty into this. She's got nothin' to do with it."

"I think she does," Gary said. "And you know what? If it wasn't for Ivy's quick thinking, we'd probably be in some dank prison cell rotting right now, or worse. Face it, Ash. You screwed this one up big time."

"So that's what you guys think? That I'm letting my feelings get in the way?"

"Ash, c'mon," Ivy said. "We're not blaming you for being upset; you have every right to be. But there's gotta be a line between our personal issues and the greater objective. That's all we're saying."

"You crossed that line," Gary said. "Whatever's going on, deal with it however you need to, but don't ever pull this crap again." He showed

Ash his back. "I know you're better than that."

Gary went to the door to knock, and a butler opened for him. Ivy lingered with Ash, but when he stuffed his hands in his pockets and stared at the ground, she sighed and went after Gary. It was only when the two of them were inside that Ash followed.

"This way, please," the butler said.

He led them through the foyer and into a wide room with a grand staircase leading up to a second floor balcony. Gary had to clench his jaw to keep his mouth from hanging open as he took in the lavish decor. The staircase was carved from marble, and the rugs upon which the trio walked were hand-woven and beautifully dyed. Vases overflowing with flowers of all colors sat along the walls, and a woman in a simple, grey yukata dutifully watered and primped them. The room was high-vaulted, and an exquisite mural took up the entire ceiling with clouds, greenery, and colorful people dancing.

"Wow," Ivy whispered. "Ash was right. This place is like a palace."

The butler led them through a door beyond the stairs, and the room opened up into a vast dining and living room. A long, wooden table carved out of an enormous Redwood tree trunk could have easily sat thirty guests. A fireplace ran along the length of the eastern wall, though it did not burn tonight. Beyond the table near the windows were tasteful couches and chairs arranged around coffee tables for mingling. Erika sat at the head of the long table, having changed out of her black kimono into an elegant, forest green one painted with white lilies.

"You're seven minutes and twenty-three seconds tardy," she said. "I've declined to meet with others for less grievous affronts."

"I believe you," Gary said evenly.

"Lara, right?"

Ivy was looking at the woman seated to Erika's right, though Gary had hardly recognized her. Gone was the war paint and the survival attire, replaced now with a tasteful, blue kimono and violet obi. Her hair was braided back out of her face, which was softer and rounder than he'd expected from someone so fierce.

Lara nodded, and the two women held each other's gazes for a moment.

"Sit," Erika ordered.

Gary and Ash took their seats to Erika's left, while Ivy helped herself to the spot next to Lara. As if on cue, a team of four waiters dressed in spiffy, black tuxedos arrived through a side door carrying trays of steaming food. They served Erika and her guests in silence, while a middle-aged woman bringing up the rear approached Erika herself and demonstrated a dusty bottle of red. Within minutes, dinner was served and the wine glasses were filled.

The meal included no meat of any kind, but it was indisputably delicious. For the first several minutes, the five dinner mates tasted the many dishes and filled their empty bellies with food and drink. Gary swirled his wine and took a sip, marveling at its smooth, earthy flavor. Erika had spared no expense on their account.

"Thank you for inviting us to dinner," Gary said. "The spread is incredible."

Dark eyes alighted on him like she'd only now noticed he was there. "I'm not here to listen to your gratitude. You said you wanted to know what was happening in Saffron, and that you wanted to put an end to Team Rocket, correct?"

"That's right."

"Then it appears we may have a common purpose. I'll hear you out, and if I determine that our interests are indeed aligned, perhaps we can come to some sort of...arrangement."

"If they're not," Lara said, "then I'll personally escort you out of Celadon. Permanently."

Gary and Ivy exchange a look. Ash remained silent, but he barely touched his food as he watched the conversation unfold.

"Fine," Gary said. "Ivy, why don't you give them the details?"

Ivy smirked and picked up the silver knife she'd been given with her bandaged hand, twirling it. "Long story short, we want to eradicate every last trace of Team Rocket from the face of the earth."

She told the women about the Chimera Project, their experiences fighting Team Rocket's genetically engineered aberrations, and the horrors of Lavender Town. She then briefly revealed her own history as a former Rocket Admin, the vendetta she'd instigated, and how the

trio was now visiting all the Kanto Gym Leaders asking for proof of support against the vile organization. They showed Erika the three badges they had thus far collected.

"We saw the Barrier around Saffron ourselves," Gary explained. "We can't make any assumptions, but whatever's happening is probably connected to our mission in some way. That's the other reason we're here. We'd hoped you could shed some light on what's going on in Saffron."

Erika swished her wine glass. "That's quite the tale. And you three have done *all* that? Impressive."

The look on her face and the flat tone with which she spoke suggested the opposite.

"It is impressive," Gary defended. "Not because we did it, but because we've turned out to be right about Team Rocket against all odds. You may be holed up in a palace surrounded by riches, but that's not gonna protect you or anyone else from Team Rocket's influence forever."

"Watch how you speak to her," Lara snapped.

Erika shifted her dark gaze to Ash. "And you. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Gary glared a hole into Ash's profile, but Ash ignored the look and finished chewing his bite of food.

"Only that if you agree to help us, we'll help you. You look like you need it."

Lara got up from her chair in a rage and brandished her dinner knife at Ash. "You whelp. I'll cut that tongue out of your mouth right here!"

Erika put a hand on Lara's shaking arm, calm as ever. "A Medium who can control a Snorlax." She shifted her gaze to Ivy. "A Reaper who isn't afraid to get her hands dirty. And you," she said to Gary. "The Clairvoyant who reins them in." She laughed lightly. "I doubt it's help you can offer, but whatever you have that's brought you this far? I *do* want it."

"Erika, you can't be serious," Lara hissed. "After what happened—"

"I'm perfectly serious. You know as well as I do that we've made

almost no progress with Saffron. Perhaps what I need is something I would never have any part of otherwise."

"Then you're agreeing to help us?" Ivy said.

Erika fixed her with a cold stare. "I have a collection of king's crowns. But I also have a mind to conquer whatever and whoever stands in my way. I am the empress of this great city; I have no time for queens and their power struggles. I'll help you with your little quest. Team Rocket is no friend of Celadon. But in exchange, you work for me on a little quest of my own. Perhaps you can get me the last crown I covet where my own efforts have failed."

"Hold on a minute," Gary said. "If you're implying what I think you are, then it's impossible. There's no way you can overthrow Saffron."

Erika smiled, and the air in the room grew colder. "Not Saffron, silly boy." She took a long sip of wine and dabbed her scarlet lips. "Sabrina. I want her dead."

Silence fell around the table as the trio processed that information.

"As charming as that is, we're not mercenaries," Ivy said. "Killing a Gym Leader doesn't exactly come without repercussions. We don't need that kind of attention."

"Let me be clear," Erika said. "You want to obliterate Team Rocket from the face of this earth, yes?"

"Well, yes—" Gary began.

"And that includes every member, down to the last, measly Grunt, yes?"

Ivy narrowed her eyes. "Wait, you can't possibly mean..."

"Sabrina *is* Team Rocket. A high-ranking member, at that. I imagine *you* have an idea of what that means."

Ivy just stared, speechless, until Ash burst out laughing and sank back into his straight-backed chair.

"I'm sorry," he managed in between fits of giggles. "It's just too hilarious!"

"Ash," Gary said. "I don't see the joke."

"How can you not? We have absolutely *no* choice in this. We have to take out Sabrina if she's Team Rocket, and there's no number of words you can spin to change that. Both of you." He gestured between Ivy and Gary. "Her Royal Highness here just played us right into her hands." He grabbed the wine bottle, refilled his glass, and saluted Erika. "Cheers to you, Princess."

Gary rubbed his temples and breathed deeply, while Ivy remained silent. Erika lifted her own wine glass and returned Ash's gesture.

"On the contrary," she said. "Cheers to you. I've been debating the best course of action now that Saffron's completely closed itself off. I believe I have my answer now. If you want to take out Team Rocket, then we'll begin with an all-out assault on the heart of their operations in Kanto and the bitch running it."

"You're telling me Team Rocket's been running Saffron this entire time?" Gary said. "I find it extremely hard to believe that's not common knowledge. Or even insider knowledge." He looked pointedly at Ivy.

"No, I'm telling you *Sabrina* runs Saffron. In exchange for her cooperation, Saffron's resources, and access to Silph, she gets the star treatment. She's become no better than a common whore, and Team Rocket just happened to be the highest bidder."

"How do you know all this when it's the first I'm hearing of it?" Ivy said.

"You were a member of Team Rocket, yes? Then you of all people should know how they like to control the flow of information. To be honest, I couldn't care less about them or their ventures. Enough money can buy anyone's hand, and that strategy has worked for me just fine with them in the past.

"But now, they think they can strong arm me by holding Silph hostage? I don't think so. There's not a thing that comes into or goes out of Celadon that I don't know about, Team Rocket included. If this is the hand they've chosen, then they invite the full might of my wrath. Of Celadon's wrath."

"Erika, what you're suggesting is nothing short of civil war. You may be a Gym Leader, but only the mayor has the power to declare martial law."

"That sniveling fool?" Lara said. "He's nothing but a figurehead. So

long as he gets his fat paycheck at the end of the month and the promise of the Gym's protection, he couldn't care less about this city. Everyone has their price, like she said. Some're just willing to sell out at the first sign of trouble."

Gary put up a hand to interrupt the conversation. "Let's assume for a minute that we agree to your proposal, and Sabrina's gone. What exactly do you plan on doing then? Absorb Saffron? Declare yourself the de facto ruler of Kanto's wealthiest metropolises? How do you think the people of Saffron, much less the other major cities, would react to such a hostile takeover?"

"You three certainly enjoy seeing the worst in people," Erika said. "A prudent practice, no doubt, but I'll be frank with you. I have no interest in assuming control of anything. I should hope your opinion of me now isn't so low as to think me a fool. This may come as a shock to you, but I'm not greedy; I simply enjoy a certain lifestyle that I wish to maintain. That becomes impossible when Saffron's doors close to the world. If anything, the other Gym Leaders will grovel at my feet for solving the problem that plagues us all so long as Sabrina remains in power."

Ivy snorted. "Don't hold your breath on that one."

"This comes down to a simple business negotiation," Erika continued. "You claim to have won over my colleagues in Pewter, Cerulean, and Vermilion, colleagues who can add their strength to mine and crush Sabrina's hold over Saffron. I have valuable information that, until now, you were not privy to, and there's more where that came from. So we'll conduct a trade—the might of Celadon and my personal support in your endeavors in exchange for your cleanup of Saffron, and all that entails."

"Since you're feeling so generous," Ash said. "how 'bout you throw in a promise to join the alliance between Pewter, Cerulean, and Vermilion. They do what they can for Lavender, but without a Gym Leader of its own, Lavender's still struggling. I want you to agree to send Lavender aid. Ex-military for their Police Department and gold enough for them to rebuild their perimeter wall. Otherwise, no deal."

"Ash," Gary said, standing. "You don't speak for all of us."

Ivy got up. "I agree with Ash." She turned to Erika. "And your little condition? I'll gladly see to it that Sabrina never sees the light of day again. That is, *if* she truly is what you say."

Erika nodded. "She is, and more."

Outnumbered, Gary clenched his fists and retreated to his thoughts for several moments. The table fell quiet and awaited his judgment.

"All right," he said finally. "If you agree to our terms—*all* of them—then we have a deal. But we'll need proof of your support to demonstrate to the other Gym Leaders when they surely question the sanity of this plan." He held out a hand. "Your Gym's Badge will suffice."

"Very well." Erika rose slowly, and Lara rose with her. Delicate fingers unclasped the multicolored pin at her breast, and she held up the small token. "This Rainbow Badge is proof of my status as a Gym Leader anointed by the people of Celadon and the Elite Four themselves. It carries with it my good name, the weight of my recommendation, and the promise of unreserved vengeance should anyone dare raise a hand against its wearer."

She walked around the end of the table, bypassed Gary, and came to a halt next to Ash, who was still seated. Pikachu hopped up on the table and twitched its whiskers.

"I trust you'll find it adequate."

Ash eyed the Rainbow Badge and the multitude of precious stones that filled in its carved petals. From sapphires to emeralds to diamonds in every color imaginable, it had to be worth more than Ash had ever and would ever see in his lifetime. He accepted the trinket and tested its weight in his hand. He chuckled softly and peered up at her under the brim of his hat.

"Oh, I think we can work something out."

"S-Steven Stone?" Lily stammered. "Like, *the* Steven Stone? Oh my goodness." She held her head in her hands as her mind raced faster than her consciousness could keep up. "But you're... You're the reigning Champion of Hoenn! What the hell are you doing in a dusty storage cell with *me*?"

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned casually against the concrete wall. As before, he took his time answering her.

"That's a long story, and for your sake, the less you know about it, the safer you'll be. Let's just say I came here as a favor to an old family

friend, and in the process of my investigations into Silph, I was...impeded."

Lily shook her head. "No way, no friggin' way! You're the *Champion*! What's the matter with you, anyway? How could you let anyone throw you in prison? Like, in real life?"

Steven laughed. "It's not so simple, as I'm sure you've deduced by now. However, now that you're here, I might have a reason to bide my time and discover what their next move is. That is, if you're willing to trust me."

"Hold on a sec. Are you saying if I hadn't ended up in here with you, you woulda broken out by now? But they took your Pokémon, too."

He laid a hand on her shoulder, and she nearly lost her balance under his unexpected weight. "Pokémon aren't everything. If only people understood that better, they might see the true potential in themselves...and in those who mean them harm."

Lily was no stranger to strong men and women with the presence of mountains and oceans, the ability to overshadow and drown out everyone around them. Blaine was one such man, but even the fiery Cinnabar Gym Leader didn't instil the same degree of dread and anticipation Steven did with a single touch. Perhaps that was what made him a god among men. Perhaps whoever had thrown him in here had felt it, too, so eager to escape his presence that they hadn't even deprived him of his armor.

"Tell me your name," he said softly.

Lily searched his eyes for something, anything at all. By reputation, he was a man of learning, a scientist like her interested in the questions most were too afraid to ask. His family was renowned not only in Hoenn, but within the science and technology communities from Kanto to Kalos. Steven himself, of course, carried a kind of infamy all his own as the Champion of Hoenn. But aside from his titles and inheritance as the crown prince of the prestigious Devon Corporation, the man himself was as unknown as the fossils Lily poured over in her lab.

"Lily Kida," she said finally. "And I'll agree to trust you, but I want something in return."

He bared his teeth in an easy grin that did nothing for her nerves. "What's that?"

"*Your* trust. I dunno what it's like outside, but I've got a pretty vivid imagination. I'd rather not face whatever's out there alone when it's time to leave."

He let his hand fall, and she breathed deeply in response to the new lightness that flooded her small frame.

"An interesting request, but not an unreasonable one. All right, for now, consider our objectives aligned."

For now.

His words rang in her ears as though he'd shouted them.

He removed one of the forged, metal rings from his right index finger and tossed it to her. "Wear that. Do not remove it under any circumstances."

"Huh? Why? It's way too big for me."

"Trust, remember?" He narrowed his eyes, and she lost the will to argue. "Just do it."

The sound of a metal door grating on its hinges silenced all conversation in the cell. Lily hastily slipped Steven's steel ring on her thumb and poked her face out between the cell bars as far as it could fit, while Steven retreated to the shadows.

"You, girl," a gruff voice said. "Boss's ready to see you."

"Fantastic!" Lily said, plastering a bright smile to her face. "Just get me a shower and a cheese omelette, and I'll be ready, too."

"Shut up." The Rocket Grunt, a burly man with hairy arms and an even hairier face, released a Koffing that floated beside him. "Now move."

Lily dropped the fake smile and stood back so he could unlock the door. The cell door swung open with a screech, making her wince.

"What about him?" she asked, indicating Steven.

"No questions. *Move*."

The Koffing puffed out small clouds of poisonous gas from its many exhaust valves in warning. Lily cast a glance back at Steven, and they locked eyes briefly. The Grunt grabbed her by the arm when she crossed the cell's threshold.

"All right, all *right*. Geez, no need to get handsy, buster."

The Grunt ignored her and locked the cell door before manhandling her to the door. She cast one last look back at Steven, but he'd blended into the shadows once more. Soon, she was stumbling down a poorly lit hallway, gritting her teeth to the shocks of pain every push from the Grunt behind her ignited down her battered back.

At the end of the corridor, they came upon an elevator that pinged when it arrived at their floor. The Grunt shoved her inside before she could walk on her own, and she caught herself on her hands against the back wall. Shaking with pain and fury, she glared back at him over her shoulder as he ambled in after, Koffing in tow, and pressed one of the floor buttons. The elevator pinged again and shot upwards, no need for a key or password or even a rudimentary security measure.

Pushing off the wall, Lily did her best to stand up straight to her full, albeit meager, height. "So, do all Rocket Grunts spend their free time slapping women around, or is it just the ones with too few brain cells to be good at anything else?"

The big guy glowered down at her like he'd only just noticed she was there. The light in his eyes slowly changed from a glint of uncertainty to barely restrained anger, skipping over understanding entirely.

"Shut up."

"I'll take that as a no, then."

The Grunt turned toward her and slugged her in the face without warning. Lily crumpled against the metal support railing before her legs gave out from under her. Stars danced in her vision, almost pretty before the stinging wave of agony hit her with nearly the same amount of brute force as the Grunt's initial punch. She heaved in a shaky breath and squeezed her eyes shut as they watered.

"Shut up."

Lily gritted her teeth and winced in pain, but she struggled to get up again with some effort. The Grunt bared his teeth at her defiance, and she wiped the spittle from her mouth.

"What's your name?" she asked.

He blinked as the anger in his dark eyes dissipated. In an almost

comical display of rudimentary comprehension, he tilted his head to see her better.

"You do have a name, right?"

Settling for simmering annoyance, he nonetheless nodded. "Boss man calls me Big Tim, 'cause I'm big."

"Well, Big Tim," Lily said just as the elevator pinged for the correct floor. She grabbed the front of his uniform in her small fist and glared up at him with every ounce of hatred she could muster. "When I get outta here, I promise to kill you first."

Big Tim just stared down at her in confusion before a voice called to the pair.

"Ah, there you are. Step into my office, please."

Lily smirked up at her escort and slipped away from him before he could react to her threat. Big Tim watched her go and, his brain finally having processed her words, snarled and pounded after her like a gorilla on a rampage.

The man behind the glass desk near the floor-to-ceiling windows raised a hand, and Big Tim stopped his hungry pursuit. "That'll be all, Big Tim, thank you."

The burly Grunt growled like an animal just a foot or two behind Lily, and she looked back at him over her shoulder to wink. He was visibly shaking, and splashes of spit flew from his mouth as he breathed through his teeth.

"Must I repeat myself?"

The warning in that tone sent a shiver down Lily's spine, and Big Tim shook his head. Gesturing to Koffing, he retreated back to the elevator. When the metal doors slid shut and the elevator pinged, the man Big Tim had left her with walked around his desk toward her. The tap, tap, tap of his expensive, leather shoes echoed much more loudly than it should have and sent electric jolts of pain through Lily's abused face.

"I would prefer if you didn't bleed all over my floor."

A pristine, white handkerchief materialized before her attached to the hand of the man who now stood in front of her. Lily looked up at him

for the first time. He was older, perhaps in his forties, and of average height with a slender build and a face that could have been anyone's. Unremarkable in every way. His suit was crisp white with red trimming to match his short hair, which was kempt and clean-shaven like the rest of him.

The office itself occupied the entire floor. Skylights overhead indicated that this was the top floor, and large release latches at the windows behind the desk offered easy access for large Flyers to come and go. Outside, all Lily could make out was the top of a very tall, ebony perimeter wall and the blue sky beyond it. A small placard sat on the glass desk that read 'Philip Gordon, President'.

Lily accepted the handkerchief and raised it to her face. Big Tim's punch had opened up the gash on her temple, and it leaked blood down her chin and onto the tiled floor.

"You'll have to excuse my subordinate. He can be...sensitive to the words of women."

"I don't want him escorting me anymore."

The man raised his eyebrows and smiled. "Oh? And what makes you think what you want matters?"

She pressed the handkerchief harder to her face to stop the bleeding. "'Cause you want something from me, something no one else can give you. That's why I'm here, isn't it? 'Cause your Rocket Scientists can't solve whatever problem you got."

The man laughed and slipped his hands in his pants pockets. "You are clever."

"I'm a genius."

"Yes, so I hear." He leaned closer to her face, and his black eyes trained on her with an ominous stare so deep, she couldn't even see her own reflection in them. "And being a genius, I'm sure I don't have to waste my time explaining things to you the way I must to Big Tim. I have very little patience for those who don't take direction well. I would assume you can learn that lesson faster than he did."

Lily said nothing, and he stood up straight once more.

"I'm going to make this very easy for you, Miss Kida. I have a project my superiors are keen to see finished, but as you said, my scientists

aren't quite up to the task. I need a specialist, an expert in the field. That's where you come in.

"I'm not an unreasonable man. If you do as you're told, no harm will come to you or your Pokémon. Yes," he said when he saw her eyes widen, "they're alive and safe with me, you needn't worry. That is, of course, unless you resist my will, in which case I'll hand your Pikachu to my Chimera team, and you can watch it be reborn." He paused. "Oh, silly me, you probably don't know what Chimera is, do you?"

Lily's mouth had gone dry at the mention of that name, the same name Ivy had warned her about last year. "I'm aware."

The man smiled. "Ah, excellent, I'm always pleased to hear our work has touched so many. So, do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," she whispered.

"Excellent." He held out a hand for her to shake. "Archer. I look forward to doing business with you."

Lily slapped his bloody handkerchief into his offered hand rather than shake it. Archer's eyes narrowed just slightly, but he blinked and smiled once again as though nothing had happened. His long fingers closed around the handkerchief.

"Are you going to explain this project to me?"

Archer examined her for a moment, thinking. "I'll leave the technical details to my lead scientists. Follow me."

He didn't wait before heading to the elevator. With little choice, Lily followed and they descended several floors. When the elevator pinged at the thirty-seventh floor, Archer led the way out and pressed his palm to a plasma reader by the heavy double doors across from the elevator. They opened automatically after confirming his identity and revealed the sights, sounds, and metallic smells of a fully operational chemical laboratory.

"So you've ousted President Gordon and commandeered Silph's labs for Team Rocket's personal use," Lily said. "How'd you pull that off?"

Archer laughed as he led her along a hallway cut off from the various rooms by glass dividers. "'Commandeer' is such a negative word. I prefer to think of it as survival of the fittest. Gordon didn't like the direction we wanted to take Silph in, but he was outnumbered. It's as

simple as that."

"So Team Rocket conducted a hostile takeover and forced him out, or..."

"I can see you have a low opinion of my organization. But regardless of what you may perceive, this is not a group of individuals seeking personal gain. We work for a higher ideal, one we can only achieve through teamwork and cooperation. It transcends personal desires or petty squabbles. Unlike the Big Tims of the world, I don't need to strike you to force you into submission. You'll do it simply because I wish it, and because you're smart enough to know this is much, much bigger than you." He caught her eyes over his shoulder. "Survival of the fittest."

Scientists in lab coats and hazmat suits bustled around the various, glass-encased rooms working on an array of projects, both large- and small-scale. Lily identified the most cutting edge machinery on the market, as well as many models she'd never seen before, perhaps never released for public use.

"Ah, you'll want to see this," Archer said.

Lily turned to the room he'd indicated just as a pair of scientists sliced open a heavily sedated Machamp. Lily paled in horror as its blood spilled into the grates on the floor, and it groaned in its half-sleep. Nearby, a Rocket Grunt lifted the blooming rose plant from an unmoving Venusaur's back, bloody roots and all, and slowly made his way to the Machamp at the scientists' direction. Tears welled in Lily's eyes, and she covered her mouth.

"Do you know what I love best about Chimera?" Archer said with a smile in his voice. "How it allows us to fuse the cutting edge of science with the boundless potential of human creativity. If you can dream it, science can create it."

The sentient Venusaur flower wiggled its roots, desperate for a host now that it had been deprived of its last one, and eagerly took to the Machamp's exposed innards. The roots coiled around its ribs and slithered among its intestines, drawing life's blood from the passed out Pokémon. The scientists talked amongst themselves, but the glass was soundproof. Lily watched the grisly ordeal in total silence, shaking. The Venusaur lay forgotten in a heap in the corner, slowly bleeding out into the grates.

Archer put a hand on her shoulder, and she jumped. "Science truly is

incredible, wouldn't you agree?"

Lily could not summon the words to respond to him, and he continued down the hall without her. She sniffled and rubbed her eyes, unable to look upon the macabre experimentation any longer, and jogged to catch up with Archer. He didn't speak again, and after a few minutes of walking and two left turns, he arrived at a dead end marked by a door. Unlike the other lab rooms, this one's walls were frosted and impossible to see through. The door required another identification step, and he peered into the laser next to it and let it scan his retina. There was a soft ping and the door unlocked from the inside. Archer opened it and held it open for Lily.

"Straight ahead," he said.

She walked numbly by him and ended up in a modestly-sized room. The machinery here was identical to the pieces she used in her work at Cinnabar Labs. Three Rocket Scientists, all in lab coats and protective eyewear, stopped what they were doing and turned to Archer and her.

"Everyone, this is Lily Kida," Archer said. "She's the specialist you asked for."

One of the scientists, a middle-aged man with salt and pepper stubble, removed his goggles and scrutinized Lily. His glossy, grey hair was tied back in a low ponytail, and his severe widow's peak added to the already aquiline shape of his face. Like a vulture examining its next meal, his unforgiving eyes glared down at Lily in appraisal.

"Finally. You brought her just in time."

"Miss Kida, this is Doctor Salvador Santos. I believe you've heard of him."

"Yes," Lily said. "It was his personal request to Cinnabar Labs that convinced my superiors to allow the trip to Fuchsia. I supposed I have him to thank for my current station here."

Santos frowned. "I don't like women scientists who talk about anything other than the job at hand. You do the work, and we won't have a problem."

"You mean the work you *can't* do? Of course, that's why I'm here, Doctor."

Santos's lips curled in a sputter. "Insolent woman. You have no right to speak to me in such a man—"

"Doctor, time is money," Archer said. "You requested the assistance, and I've delivered, as promised. I expect concrete results in the timeframe we agreed upon in return. Is that clear?"

"'Course, Archer. I agreed to it, didn't I?"

"Good. I would hate to have to report to my superiors that they'll have to wait for a pushed back deadline *again*."

Lily looked between the two men, noting the way Santos's lips twitched as Archer reiterated his expectations.

"I trust you can explain things from here?" Archer went on.

"Sure."

"I'll send someone to retrieve her at the end of the day."

With that, Archer saw himself out and left Lily alone with Santos and his two assistants, who stood still and watched. He gave Lily a cursory once-over and curled his lips in repugnance.

"Women have no place in my lab," Santos said, "but I got it on good authority that you're the best paleogeneticist west of Unova."

"Oh, I suppose Aurea Juniper wasn't available for consultation."

He pressed his lips together in a thin line. "Let's get one thing straight. I'm in charge here, and you're only safe so long as I think you're useful. You saw what my colleagues in the Chimera division like to do in their labs, so you shut up and do your job unless you want to get better acquainted with them."

"Are you gonna explain things to me, or will you waste more of Archer's time demeaning my entire field based on my gender?"

"Doctor," one of the other scientists called from across the room. "I hate to interrupt, but we had better get started."

Outnumbered and under time pressure from a man Lily did not blame him for fearing, Santos grumbled something under his breath and jerked his head in Lily's direction before stalking off toward the long tables and the machinery perched atop them. His two assistants, young men several years Lily's senior and visually similar in a way

only immediate family could be, stepped aside for the two of them and revealed a thick, stone slab in a wide, sterile, glass container.

"Chul and Haneul," Santos said by way of introduction.

Haneul eyed Lily's disfigured face. "Just Han is fine."

The brothers worked together to get the X-ray going, while Santos typed a few commands on the supercomputer next to it. After a moment, a digital rendering of the stone slab appeared on the computer screen, while the X-ray slowly traced the insides.

"What you see isn't a fossil, per se, but a slab of petrified sodium chloride excavated from the bottom of the Whirl Trench off the southern coast of Fuchsia City. What I want, and what Archer wants, is to extract the preserved organic matter inside it and revive it. We've already managed to extract the genetic material here." Santos indicated three large, glass tubes sitting in a foam-lined briefcase, each of which contained cotton swabs stained with a greyish black substance. He curled back his upper lip in disgust. "Our past attempts to recreate the living tissue resulted in failure."

"We tried everything," Chul explained. "From Poliwhirl DNA bases to untested synthetic bonding agents. Silph makes innovators look myopic with the tech they got here, but so far nothing's worked. We're stumped."

Lily glanced at the X-ray, which slowly came to life in a picture of white lines that formed a pattern. "Poliwhirl DNA only works for certain Water-type Pokémon, and even then you have to account for the fossil Pokémon's original makeup. Take Omanyte, for example. Poliwhirl DNA worked as a base, but Omanyte's a cephalopod. I needed to fill in the gaps with a ton of other samples before I arrived at the perfect cocktail. It was a decent bit of trial and error."

"We don't have time for trial and error," Santos said. "I want this solved by the end of the week."

Lily snorted. "The end of the week? That's hardly enough time to collect all the different samples I'd wanna try, much less actually *try* them. You'd have to extract more of that," she gestured at the three canisters, "and having worked with petrified sodium chloride before, I'm well aware how fragile it is. This procedure takes time and precision, that's why there's so few people in the world who can do it properly."

"You have until the end of the week," Santos reiterated. "And you have three tries to get it right. If it's samples you need, we have DNA from almost every known Pokémon species from Kanto to Kalos. One of the benefits of doing business with a global leader like Silph."

Lily gaped at them. "You can't be serious. To even *begin* to consider this working in that amount of time, I'd need to know specific details about the Pokémon you're trying to revive, information about its unique genetic code, its evolutionary line, everything. Do you have that kind of information? 'Cause in my experience, with ancient Pokémon you start *below* rock bottom and work your way up. The whole process can take years."

"It's not a Pokémon we're interested in reviving, but a living piece of it," Han said. "That should make it simpler."

Lily crossed her arms and looked between the three men. "I mean, *possibly*. It depends on what part, and on how functional it needs to be. I'd ask why you don't want the Pokémon itself, but I'm assuming you're not gonna answer me that."

"No," Santos said. "But I can give you an idea of the results we're hoping to achieve."

The X-ray had finished loading, and an unintelligible web of white lines on black tangled together on the screen. Chul began to type on the supercomputer, and the digital manipulation of the X-ray morphed as it recorded the information. A lifelike, 3D rendering of the fossil's interior bloomed to life on the screen, and Lily squinted at it.

"What am I looking at?"

It was a distinct pattern, a shape reminiscent of a geyser in mid-burst.

"Just a sec." Chul continued to type commands into the computer, and the shape filled in with color. "We've recreated what it should look like when it's finished based on, uh, confidential source material."

Greys and silvers dyed the body of the odd shape with such a high degree of precision that rifts and imperfections in the original shone through. The blooming tips of the shape faded to a stunning, ocean blue that sparkled and pixelated on the screen. Frowning, Lily drew closer.

"What's... Is that a feather?"

It was as long as her forearm in its true-to-size rendering, and she was sure she'd never seen anything quite like it. Fearow and Pidgeot down feathers were only about as long as her palm, five inches in length at most. Whatever this had come from had to be bigger. A hell of a lot bigger.

"Yes. But this one is all but destroyed. Our task here is to recreate it using the original genetic data," Santos said.

Lily shook her head. "But why? Why would Team Rocket want some ancient feather instead of whatever extinct Pokémon shed it?"

Santos's eyes lit up with a spark Lily knew all too well, for she'd gotten it herself many times in the past when she was on the brink of a groundbreaking discovery. "Because this isn't from an extinct Pokémon. It's the missing link we need to lure the beast out of hibernation."

Lily watched him in horror at the thought of something big enough to have dropped this enormous feather having captured Team Rocket's attention. "And...what beast would that be?"

Santos touched his wiry hand to the computer screen and traced the digitized image, reverent. "The legendary king of the nine oceans."

He grinned, giddy in his personal delusion of grandeur, and cast Lily a glance askance.

"Lugia."

The trio spent the next several days lying low in Celadon under Erika's protection. To uphold part of their end of the bargain, they sent messenger Pidgeotto to each of Pewter, Cerulean, Vermilion, and Lavender to relay Erika's request for assistance in breaking Sabrina's and Team Rocket's hold over Saffron. And true to her word, Erika relayed every bit of information she had on Saffron's trainers, defenses, and structural layout.

"It's a walled city with gates here," she indicated the outer perimeter, "here, and here. Three walls in total. When you count the Barrier, that's four."

As usual, she wore a radiant kimono and was perfectly primped and made up. In his grubby traveling clothes, Gary was barely a smudge against the verdant background next to her shining ensemble.

He followed the path of her finger on the topographic map. "If we can bring down the Barrier, though, Flyers can scale the walls."

Erika shook her head. "Not with Sabrina's Psychics on guard. They'll ground anything that gets close, and they won't have to muddy their hands to do it."

"So you're suggesting we level Saffron's walls? That'll take a lot of power and strength. Not just any Pokémon can cut through solid stone."

"You underestimate my Grass-types. *Don't.*"

"It's not about underestimating anyone. If Sabrina has her army waiting behind the walls, they'll be ready to rain hellfire on us all. I may not have Sabrina's experience, but I'm Clairvoyant, too. If it were me, I'd keep the maximum distance and deal long-range damage. She'd topple the vanguard in the time it takes to power up a Solar Beam."

"You let me worry about my Pokémon's attacking logistics. I'm the Sylvan here, not you."

Gary rose from the leaf-strewn table Erika had set up in the Gym arena. The structural damage Ash had wrought the other night was repaired in full with not even a hairline crack to be seen in the glass walls and ceiling of the vast greenhouse. Erika's and her trainers' Pokémon lounged along the stream and under the shade of the trees on this balmy afternoon. Victreebel hung from a winding tree, snoozing, while Tangrowth and Vileplume had retreated to the shade to replenish nutrients expended during their more active nights. At every turn, Grass Pokémon of numerous Kanto and Johto species milled about in perfect harmony with the natural atmosphere and each other.

She caught his distraction and leaned over the table. "You know, Sylvans and Clairvoyants are distantly related. Psychics manipulate the natural energy in the air, in time and space, while my Grass-types take advantage of that energy's physical manifestations in the trees and flowers around us. We fight in similar manners, too. They draw on my energy whereas you draw on your Psychics' energy. In the end, we're perfectly in sync with our Pokémon."

"As fascinating as that is, it doesn't tell me how to deal with the immediate problem of Sabrina's Psychic army."

"Did someone say Sabrina?" Ivy walked over with Wigglytuff, who

happily hopped up onto the table and began to nibble at the damp leaves scattered atop it.

Erika's gaze flickered to Ivy, and she stood up. "Perhaps you can assist us. You were formerly with Team Rocket, so how would you topple your own stronghold?"

"I wouldn't."

"What do you mean, you wouldn't?" Gary asked. "You're just gonna glare the Psychics to death?"

Ivy crossed her arms. "Of course not." She glanced at the map and pointed to the very center within the third wall. "I'd go for the head. Sever it, and the rest will fall without a leader."

"Not so fast," Erika said. "Sabrina may be in charge, but her network in Saffron is hydralike. Even if we kill her off, there are others who can and will keep the ground forces in line." She drew their attention to a large structure next to the Gym behind the third wall. "Silph headquarters. This is where Team Rocket's top brass will be." She slid her manicured finger farther back to a building between the second and third walls. "And this is the Fighting Dojo. It's not just Psychics we'll be facing."

Ivy made a face. "I don't like Fighters."

"Hold on," Gary said. "Didn't Sabrina wipe out the Dojo? That's what Misty told us."

Erika smirked. "Not exactly. It's true that she overthrew their leader and assumed totalitarian control, but Sabrina's not one to throw away an opportunity to use someone to do her grunt work for her." Erika tapped the space on the map. "She's got Master Itosu Anko hostage so his students will fight for her." Erika glanced at Ivy. "She's well aware of her Pokémon's type disadvantages, few as they may be."

"And so am I."

Gary crossed his arms. "Okay, so from where I'm standing, it looks like we need to take out not just Sabrina herself, but also whoever the Rocket Admin at Silph is and whatever collateral he or she's packing." He paused, thinking. "As for the Dojo Fighters, there's no way they're loyal to Sabrina."

"That's correct. Presumably, if we can liberate their master, they

should have every interest in joining our cause," Erika said.

"Right, good. I like that."

"To free the master, we need to take out Sabrina, which we've already established isn't going to give us much of a break without taking out the rest of the Rocket Admins in Saffron, too. And by then, it won't matter if the Fighters are helping or not." Ivy sighed. "The chicken is laying that egg, guys."

Gary pinched the bridge of his nose. "No, it's the chicken and the egg. It has nothing to do with laying— You know what? Never mind. I dunno why I even bother."

"Whoa!"

Ash fell on his rear a short ways away, and he dropped the spear he'd been using. Lara cornered him with crossed knives over his throat.

"Too slow," Lara said, pushing off him to give him some space.

Erika pushed off the table. "Excuse me."

Ash got to his feet and dusted himself off as she approached. "Oh, hey, Erika. Come to check on me?"

"I'm curious. For a Medium, you train a strange group of Pokémon. And your attitude is all wrong. Even when you foolishly challenged me, you were rash and rude, more like a Fulmen or Ignifer than a Medium."

"Uh, okay... So what're you curious about?"

"How have you not died already?"

Ash frowned and reached out a hand for Pikachu. "Kinda harsh, don't you think?"

"It's a fair question, and I'd like to hear your answer if we'll be putting our lives at stake."

Ash selected two Pokéballs from his belt and tossed them. His Venusaur, a blue-green behemoth large enough to mount, shook out the red flower that grew from its back and sniffed the humid air. Immediately, tiny Bulbasaur, Ivysaur, and Bellsprout flocked to it from the underbrush. Ash's Butterfree floated next to Venusaur and settled on the edge of the bloom on its back. Ash kneeled down and patted

Venusaur's meaty, front leg. The pet earned him a low rumble from the Pokémon.

"I've been with most of these guys since I was a kid," he said. "Doesn't matter if it's Pikachu or Snorlax or Venusaur, they're all the same to me." He looked up and grinned at Erika. "And to them, it doesn't matter if I'm a Medium or whatever. We're better together."

Erika walked to Venusaur's other side and ran a delicate hand over the base of the flower on its back, where the roots merged with Venusaur's leathery flesh and entwined with its spine. Her ministrations caused the big Pokémon to close its eyes and sink to the ground, totally relaxed. Ash gaped at the sight and mimicked the motion. Venusaur groaned in contentment, and he laughed.

"Usually, Tamers choose to surround themselves with the Pokémon that naturally take to them. But you and Gary don't, and even Ivy has several incompatible Pokémon on her team. As Tamers we risk type casting ourselves, both to our advantage and our detriment. And yet, it's risky to rely on Pokémon outside our affiliations. They don't always behave as we would like."

"Yeah, well, like you said, it's dangerous to stick with one type. Besides, Venusaur and me've been together for years."

Erika studied him. "Perhaps."

"What is it?"

"Nothing. But you remind me that there are very old tales of an original Tamer that could hold sway over all types of Pokémon. There's no official record of such a person holding that kind of power, and in all likelihood it's a storyteller's invention. But still, there are some people alive today who can...influence the world around them if certain conditions are met."

"Influence? Sounds like just regular trainers to me. Lots of people train different types of Pokémon."

"You misunderstand. I don't mean the Pokémon they influence obey out of loyalty, but out of duty. They don't have a choice in the matter, even if they're forced to turn on their allies." She withdrew from Venusaur and looked at Ash directly. "A Tamer such as that would be a fearsome opponent to cross."

Butterfree wandered onto Ash's outstretched arm and slowly flapped

its wings, shedding a thin sheen of silvery dust. "Well, regardless, my team's pretty solid. I mean, Charizard can be a dick, and Snorlax loses focus if I'm not careful. But they're solid, and they've always come through for me."

"I didn't mean to suggest otherwise. Clearly, the loyalty your Snorlax has shown you proves you've earned it, not stolen it."

They fell into a short but comfortable silence, and Ash rubbed the back of his neck. "Listen, Erika... I should apologize for the way I stormed in here like a bat outta hell. Gary and Ivy chewed me out about it already, but I wanted you to hear it from me. This is your Gym. I'm sorry I disrespected that."

"You should be. I don't forgive easily, as I warned you before. The only reason I've welcomed you three here is because I see the value in our alliance."

"Well, yeah, but it doesn't have to be just business. We've made things work with Brock and Misty, and even Surge. He's not a bad guy when you get to know him. Well...most of the time."

"Charming, but I have no interest in friendship, and neither should you." She leaned forward over Venusaur and fixed him with the cold stare he'd faced when they battled in this very spot not long ago. "In this world, alliances are only ever as good as the assets backing them. Eliminate those, and you force parties to choose between their real interests and hollow words of promise. What do you suppose most people will choose to do then?"

"I think they *should* choose to honor their agreements in good faith, just like I expect you to honor yours."

Erika smiled. "So long as I see profit for Celadon, I will always act in good faith, rest assured. But do not be so naïve as to imagine others will offer the same courtesy. Take it from a rich girl—everyone has a price."

She made to leave, but Ash grabbed her hand. "So what price did Sabrina accept to screw you over?"

To Erika's credit, she kept her expression perfectly schooled, but Ash's spectral eyes detected the flutter in her aura.

"That's what happened, right? You hate her so much, which means you had to love her once to feel so intensely."

"Let go of me," she said in a tone that brooked no room for argument.

Ash held fast. "What happened? Did she turn on you, and you couldn't handle it?"

Erika's smile made his skin crawl. "The opposite of love is indifference. But indifference will never ensure that Sabrina gets what she bargained for." She yanked her hand free with more strength than Ash expected. "No second chances."

She turned on her heel and stalked toward the edge of the jungle where her Victreebel hung from the vines above. The huge pitcher plant lowered to the grass on its leafy appendages and allowed her to examine the contents of its wide-brimmed mouth, docile as a baby.

Lara, who'd given them some privacy, crossed Ash's line of sight and tossed him the spear he'd dropped. "For what's coming, you have to be prepared to do your worst, or Saffron will devour us all. Can I trust you to do that?"

Ash glanced at Ivy and Gary, who were still hunched over the map of Saffron and the surrounding Routes, plotting. He twirled the wooden spear into his dominant hand, and Pikachu dropped down to his side, sparking.

"Yeah. I'll do whatever it takes."

Lara nodded stiffly, and they ran at each other, blades flying.

14. Saffron City, Part 1

Triumvirate, chapter 14: Saffron City, Part 1
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Ivy didn't sleep the night before they marched on Saffron. She lay in bed next to Gary, who slept soundly and silently. Espeon breathed shallow breaths at the foot of the bed, equally sound asleep, but Umbreon opened one yellow eye and peered at Ivy through the gloom. She rubbed her eyes and sighed.

"Can't sleep?"

She jumped and turned to see Gary looking right at her. "Wow, I was sure you were fast asleep."

He ran a hand up her arm, and she shivered at his natural warmth. "I could...hear you thinking. It was loud."

She propped herself up on an elbow. "I'm sorry, what? I thought you said you weren't psychic?"

He rose up on an elbow so they were at eye level with each other. "I'm not. Espeon just kinda drifts. I can't do it normally," he said quickly. "Just...when I'm dreaming."

"...Wow."

"Listen, I wasn't trying to eavesdrop or—"

"No, I mean, clearly you're becoming a better Clairvoyant ever since Espeon evolved. I'm starting to see why the Gym Leaders like to surround themselves with one type. It must have this effect."

"Makes sense."

They lapsed into silence and shifted in the bed, disturbing the felines at their feet. Espeon and Umbreon got up, stretched, and hopped off the bed.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Ivy said softly.

He twirled some of her long hair around his finger. "What is it?"

"I'm...afraid. Of what we'll do in Saffron, I mean. Not the fighting or anything like that." She laughed a little. "I'm used to that life, you

know."

"What're you afraid of?"

She smiled. "You believe me?"

"Why wouldn't I believe you?"

She lay back down and laid an arm over her eyes. "Even Agatha was afraid of me. What I am. What I can do... Ash, and even you." He shifted, and she put a hand over his lips. "Don't deny it. I'm not angry or anything, it's just the way I am. I guess it's how I've always been. Well, not always, I mean, but long enough for it not to matter anymore."

"Ivy..."

"I'm happy you believe me, okay? That's enough."

Gary sighed. "You're not a monster. Don't listen to Erika. She doesn't know you."

In the darkness his face was so clear to her eyes, right down to the faint scars that ran along his forehead and cheek where Team Rocket's Meowth had attacked him in Lavender. "I don't care about that. I just care about what *you* think." She closed her eyes. "It's not about whether I'm a monster or not. It's about whether you're okay with it."

"Ivy, what's going on? You're bad at riddles. Just say what you mean."

Despite herself, tears welled in her eyes when she looked at him. "I'm afraid...you'll see me for real in this war. I dunno if I want you to see that. I dunno if you'll be able to stand it."

He slipped a hand around the back of her neck and entangled his fingers in her loose hair. His breath was warm on her lips as he leaned in and touched their foreheads together. "I've already seen everything there is to see."

She sat up fully and hugged her knees. His hand fell to the pillow. "No, you don't know, not really. You know my story, yeah, but there's a difference between me telling you and actually living it." She buried her face in her knees and took a shuddering breath. "Team Rocket, the Masked Man, and even this Reaper thing... I'm in the dark, and I can't see the bottom. I can't drag you down there with me. I don't know what's down there."

Gary had proven himself to be a very hands off kind of guy, emotionally and physically, for the most part. She'd never complained, having found a rhythm with him first as uneasy acquaintances, then as almost friends, and finally as lovers. But Agatha's words still haunted her to this day. Someone like her, and someone like Gary, they were night and day. The sun never meets the moon, and if it did, it would have the vast, endless night to battle just to get within reach.

"I'm afraid of what I'll do," she went on. "And I'm afraid I won't regret it." She turned back to him, and he watched her with an unreadable look in his half-lidded, green eyes. "I'm afraid I'll like it."

He sat up but refrained from touching her. They sat next to each other, knees to their chests, and breathed. "Okay."

She blinked. "Okay?"

"Okay."

"That's all you have to say?"

"Yeah. Look, we both know this fight's gonna be bad, the worst we've seen, for sure. People will die, Pokémon will die. I think we have a shot at winning, but not without a heavy cost. Maybe Erika's willing to pay it, but I dunno if I am. I don't even know what it means, not really. But you," he glanced at her askance, and the green of his eyes dazzled her sensitive sight. "You know exactly what you have to do. What it'll cost. I envy you that. I guess when you can see in the dark, you see what no one else wants to see, and somehow you still face it. I wish I was that brave."

"Gary," she said, barely audible. "You don't know what I'm capable of."

"I think you're capable to doing what's necessary, even if it's hard. We're gonna need people like that. Ash and me...we're still learning that part. But I trust you."

Tears dripped down her cheek and landed on her bare arm, cold, like the rest of her. "You trust me?"

He smiled a genuine smile, the kind he reserved only for dark places where no one but she could see them. "I trust you with everything."

She sniffled and wiped her eyes. "Damn. I hate you when you're like this. Makes me all jello-y."

His soft laughter made her stomach to a flip, and before she could dry her eyes, he'd pinned her to the bed beneath him. "Sure you do."

They crashed together in a desperate kiss that went on forever, lips and hands and the heat he shared. She ran her palms down the front of him, dragging her nails the way she knew he liked, and grabbed him firmly enough to mean it. They broke apart, and she took just a small moment for herself to admire him, the way he watched her like there was nothing but the air between them, and even that was in the way. The abyssal green of his eyes that, if she was being honest, had captivated her from the first moment she'd seen him, so eager to cut him down and so invigorated every time he got back up. He never got old, never tired, never bored, and he never looked away.

"Ivy," said through gritted teeth.

Her tears were still wet on her cheeks as he pulled her close and kissed them away. She drew red paths along his sinewy back, marking where she'd been and where he had yet to go. Caught up in the passion of him, she flipped them and he hit the mattress with a grunt as she pinned him with her hips. Smooth hands gripped her thighs and pulled her closer in rhythm as she threw her head back, unable to remain silent. Pink toes curled around the silken sheets as she arched her back and closed her eyes to the ever present darkness. His palms were searing hot against her bare skin, drawing in her cold making it his as they collapsed together. She landed on the pillow next to him out of breath and lost for thought as she just watched him through the haze. Her cheeks itched with her dried tears, and she rubbed them with the back of her hand.

"Get some sleep," Gary said, out of breath.

He threw an arm around her waist and wrapped the sheet around her before she could agree. Darkness fell around them once more and filled the silence, comforting. His arms were warm around her back, sturdy, and she thought about Agatha's words again. They lived in her memory, never quite silent, but for now they seemed a distant echo that failed to dispel the pleasant thrum up and down her skin.

"Goodnight."

He said nothing as he held her, pulsing with warmth. And for the first time all night, she let her eyes droop and drifted off to a place far away.

Gary stood at the base of a tall tree, fully armored and squinting into the distance. The Barrier surrounding Saffron glistened in the predawn light over a thousand feet high. Espeon rubbed against his leg, and Gary kneeled down to pet the violet feline.

An image of shadowy, bipedal figures materialized before his eyes, there but not quite.

I know, he communicated silently. *Lotta strong Psychics in there.*

Espeon twitched its ears, and the shadowy figures faded. The grass and trees blurred together as Espeon's telepathic sight explored deeper into Saffron beyond the third and final wall. A sharp whistling preceded a sudden, acute pain in Gary's head, and he cried out before falling to his hands and knees, clutching his aching head. Espeon hissed over him and slashed the air with its bisected tail.

"Gary, hey, you okay? What the hell happened?"

Ash jogged to his side with Pikachu and lent him an arm to stand. Ivy was right behind him.

"What's going on?" she demanded. "What'd you do?"

Gary hissed and rubbed his temple to will the pain away. He blinked, bleary-eyed, down at Espeon. "At least we tried."

"Tried what?" Ash said.

"To see past the Barrier, get an idea of what we're up against." He tugged at his hair. "But something—someone blocked me out. I've never felt anything like it. That had to be Sabrina behind the third wall."

Ivy thwacked him on the head. "Idiot. Are you trying to get yourself killed? You *know* she's got the home field advantage here, and I'm sorry to say, but she's obviously been doing this a lot longer than you."

"Did you see anything at all?" Ash asked. "You know, before she kicked you out?"

"Just that there's an army of Psychics waiting for us. Nothing we didn't already know."

"Then I suggest we get started."

Erika approached the trio with Lara at her side. Both women were

armored from head to toe in sleek black and green. Gone was the makeup, the hairdo, the expensive kimono. The Erika standing before them now was the Gym Leader of one of the most powerful metropolises in the world, and she was tired of waiting.

"My warriors are in position," Erika went on. "All that's left is to strike at the opportune moment."

Gary nodded. "The others are ready and waiting. I can feel them."

"Good. We only have one shot at this, so there's no room for failure."

The trio followed Erika to the vanguard where most of her warrior trainers stood, all armed and armored and ready for action. Behind them stood the foot soldiers, men and women with military training, ex mercs, and a group of local Pokémon trainers loyal enough to volunteer for the cause. With an army two-thousand strong, roughly a quarter of whom were Pokémon trainers, Erika had spared no expense for this expedition.

"Everyone, stick to the plan," Erika shouted so her army could hear. "Footmen, stay back until I give the signal. I will breach the Barrier, and when that happens you will all need to move quickly. Our reinforcements will reach us once we've reached Wall Trophonius. Until then, we're on our own."

"Ma'am!"

The soldiers saluted from their stations among the heavily wooded Route Seven.

"Whatever happens, remember that I will be fighting with you. Together, we *will* prevail." She raised a fist. "Saffron's tyranny ends today!"

The soldiers mimicked her gesture and huzzahed.

"Wonder what she's paying them to make them risk their lives like this," Ivy whispered.

"Doesn't matter," Ash said. "All the money in the world can't buy real loyalty. Look."

The men and women in her vanguard grinned and whispered among themselves. They wore Celadon Gym's green coat of arms proudly on their armor. Some looked on at Erika with barely constrained

reverence as she released her sturdy Venusaur and climbed atop its back. Unlike Ash's Venusaur, this one bore a pale yellow flower on its back, and its leathery skin was a darker shade of blue, a genetic variation indicative of its subspecies.

"They believe in her. Whatever we might think about her, she didn't get to be Gym Leader on her family's dime."

Ivy favored him with a smile. "Ash, that was actually kinda wise."

He shrugged. "What? I can be wise."

She laughed and selected a Pokéball from her belt. "More than wise, we need to be smart today. Got it?"

He nodded grimly. "Don't worry about me. Today's about Team Rocket. I won't forget that."

"Good."

Gary released Arcanine, who trotted into place next to Erika's Exeggutor and panted. The Coconut Pokémon side-eyed it with its six, swiveling eyeballs and drooled from two of its three mouths.

"Here we go." Ivy released Tyranitar, who immediately glared at the Psychic Barrier and bared its teeth.

"Ready to break some stuff?" she said.

Tyranitar ambled after her into place next to Arcanine, big tail swishing in anticipation of the carnage ahead. Ash gazed through the Barrier to the northeast where the Cerulean and Pewter forces would be waiting to strike at the agreed upon time. He took a steadying breath and released Snorlax. Gengar sensed his anticipation and materialized over his shoulders like his personal thundercloud.

"Hold," Erika said as she watched the horizon. "On my mark."

With Exeggutor on her left and Victreebel on her right, she encouraged Venusaur forward a safe distance from her her vanguard. The trio followed with their bulkiest Pokémon and came to a halt in line with each other.

Ash patted Snorlax's thick fur. "You ate everything between here and Celadon," he said. "So now, time to burn off those calories. Ready, big guy?"

Snorlax gazed lazily between Ash and the other large Pokémon standing in line with it, then at the Barrier just thirty feet away. It fell to its four paws and shook out its thick hide before opening its toothy maw in a yawn.

And then, silence.

Gary watched the horizon and counted the seconds as the sun slowly dared to encroach upon the night. He held his breath and fisted Arcanine's great mane. The first, fledging rays of sunlight breached the eastern horizon, and the Barrier sparkled like cut quartz. The shadows fled from the group's cluster, exposing them to daylight. Erika slammed her arm down.

"Now!"

The edge of Route Seven lit up in a rush of blinding Fire Blasts, Hyper Beams, and Solar Beams that mingled over and around each other until they hit the edge of the Barrier with a deafening crack. Veins of superheated light zigzagged along the Barrier as its Psychic energy battled against the assault. To the south, thunderous electricity sent sparks along the wall that reached all the way to the ceiling, while to the north the Barrier whined against a pressurized water onslaught. Something pounded in rhythm against the walls, shaking them harder and harder with each connected hit.

"Steady!" Erika shouted over the roar.

"A little more!" Gary said as he scanned the Barrier with Espeon's mystical sight.

The Pokémon doubled down and let loose. Tyranitar and Snorlax sank their claws into the earth as they heaved. The veins of light engorged along the Barrier and sank through its translucent walls, smoking, until all of a sudden it gave and shattered into a million glass-like shards. Waves of Psychic energy released into the atmosphere where the Barrier pieces ripped apart at the seams. Espeon leaped into the air and threw up a thick wall of sapphire light just as the imploding Barrier reversed direction and shot outward at all angles. Bolts of Psychic energy slammed into the Safeguard and burst into silvery dust before they could hit Erika's army. Gary followed the Barrier's collapse as the cracks raced higher along the walls and tore into the ceiling.

Behind them, the Celadon warriors whooped and clapped. When the Barrier had fallen altogether and Espeon lowered the Safeguard, Erika wasted no time in rallying her army.

"To Wall Trophonius!"

The foot soldiers brandished all manner of swords, staves, and crossbows honed from their military training during the Great War as they took off just behind the Pokémon trainers. Vast farms and few houses stood between Route Seven and the edge of Wall Trophonius, Saffron's first line of defense. It was a grey, stone structure that stood two hundred feet tall, the shortest of the three perimeter walls that rose up higher in succession to protect the city's most valuable political and economic assets from even its own citizens. Beyond it lived Saffron's bulk citizens, the poor and the middle class that staffed Saffron's farms and factories.

Not a hundred yards beyond where the Barrier had been erected, Saffron's own foot soldiers were waiting with sharpened steel and wooden bolts. Gary threw another Pokéball and released Nidoking just in time to catch Ivy's eye.

"Earthquake!" they both shouted.

Nidoking and Tyranitar threw their armored heads back in roars that could wake the dead before slamming their meaty front claws into the ground with tremor-inducing force. The earth began to shake and thick crags split the ground, racing straight for the Saffron forces. They screamed and tried to scatter, but the rock spires that rose from the bowels of the earth knocked a number of them into the air and buried even more. Bones cracked and blood flowed, and it was all the spark Erika's warriors needed to charge in.

Gary released Golduck and Scizor to join Espeon, Nidoking, and Arcanine and initiated communication with all of them at once via Espeon's telepathy. He scanned the enemy forces, lingering on their amber-gilded crests marking them as Saffron soldiers.

Scizor, Nidoking, Arcanine. Take out as many as you can.

The three large Pokémon took off, their targets set. Scizor slammed a Metal Claw into a large man holding a crossbow just as he fired off a bolt that pierced one of Erika's warrior women through the chest. The red mantis popped the man's skull clean off his shoulders like a bottle cap between its tempered pincers, dropped the head, and moved on to the next one.

Erika had no qualms about releasing her entire army of Grass-types and wreaking havoc on the Saffron soldiers. Tangrowth morphed into a squirming mass of vines that all but swallowed two men whole,

constricting them and shoving sentient vines into every orifice until they fell still, suffocated.

"Get to Wall Trophonius!" she shouted over the sounds of battle.

Ash recalled Snorlax and tossed out three more Pokéballs from his belt before taking off running toward the wall. In a rush of light and wind, Charizard, Blastoise, and Venusaur landed on the ground at his back just as a handful of Saffron soldiers made to corner him. One of them loosed a bolt from a crossbow at him before he could react, but a blur of green shot out in front of him and caught the bolt out of thin air. Venusaur snapped the two-foot projectile in half with the crushing force of its Vine Whip. Charizard let out an otherworldly howl and lumbered down next to Ash.

"Blast 'em!"

Blastoise hunkered down on its right arm and released the twin cannons in its huge shell. Jets of Hydro Pump shot out and slammed into the nearest three soldiers. The ones who didn't get hit fumbled for the Pokéballs at their belts and released a small army of Raticate and Tauros, along with a particularly menacing Nidoqueen. Charizard's maw smoked and sparked, and after a moment's power up, he spewed a thick Flamethrower that sent the Raticate scattering and rammed Nidoqueen in the gut. The huge rodent dug her hind legs into the ground and caught the fire with a grunt of pain, but she held her position and slowly charged forward.

"Flamethrower!"

Another jet of fire joined with Charizard's as Houndoom landed next to it. Ivy ran past the two Pokémon and skidded under the fire while drawing a knife from a holster on her arm. She let it fly and it landed in the leg of Nidoqueen's trainer. Distressed by its trainer's cries of pain, Nidoqueen faltered against the fire pummeling it and lost its balance. It screeched in pain as the heat finally overpowered it and it fell over, smoking and charred, on top of its trainer. His screams died slowly as he was burned and smothered to death under her cooked flesh.

"You're fucking crazy!" Ash shouted even as he ran ahead and joined some of Erika's warriors, who were also fighting with Grass-type Pokémon.

A horde of Ivysaur, Tangela, and Weepinbell gathered together to launch a storm of Razor Leaves that scattered the Saffron soldiers long

enough to clear a direct path to Wall Trophonius three hundred yards due east. Ash waved a hand to his Pokémon.

"C'mon!"

Venusaur and Blastoise lumbered forward over trampled corn crops and golden grass, following Pikachu, while Charizard took to the skies and soared over Ash's head. He grinned.

"We're almost there!"

This is too easy, Gary thought as he made his way forward, flanked by Golduck and Espeon. Erika and her soldiers were making short work of the Saffron forces minus the unavoidable casualties here and there, both people and Pokémon. But it wasn't the insurmountable resistance he'd been expecting, not by a long shot.

Something's not right.

They were nearly in range of Wall Trophonius, and Nidoking roared as it knocked down several Saffron soldiers with a deadly Poison Jab. The men went flying, pierced with poison, and skidded into the corn fields on all sides. Gary looked around through his Pokémon's eyes filled with blood, flayed flesh, and dust as they rampaged almost without restraint. Movement atop Wall Trophonius caught Arcanine's sharp vision.

"Incoming!" Gary shouted.

From the top of Wall Trophonius, Fighters bearing boulders flung the massive stones hundreds of feet out. They arced overhead before gravity caught up to them and sent them hurtling to the earth like a small meteor shower. A group of Celadon military men were buried completely by a falling boulder just five yards to Gary's right. The tremor that reverberated through the ground when the thousand pound boulder hit was enough to draw frightened panic from both sides of the fighting.

"Shit," he swore as more came flying. "Arcanine!"

He scrambled backward and broke into a sprint, but the falling boulders were too fast to outrun. He scooped up Espeon and led Golduck as quickly as they could go as one of the boulders tracked them through the sky. In a blur of orange and black, Arcanine raced past Gary and dipped its head so he could grab a fistful of golden mane. The big canine's powerful muscles hoisted Gary up onto its

back, while Golduck leaped up behind him and held fast with the help of its telekinesis.

"Go!"

Arcanine lurched forward in a burst of inhuman speed, tearing up the ground and burning corn stalks in its wake. The falling boulder smashed into the ground at its heels, and Arcanine leaped. The rapid jostling drew bile to Gary's throat, and it was all he could do to hang on for dear life as Arcanine maneuvered the war zone with the help of Extreme Speed.

Nearby, Ivy ducked with Houndoom under Tyranitar, who punched one of the boulders with its bare fist and shattered it like it was nothing but a piñata. Pebbles and dust exploded outward and rained down on Ivy and her Pokémon as the prize for Tyranitar's well-aimed brute strength.

Ash's Blastoise and Erika's larger Grass-type Pokémon did their best to blast the rocks out of line with the Celadon army in a combination of Hydro Pumps, Egg Bombs, and Vine Whips, but it wasn't enough. Gritting his teeth, Gary searched around for the boulders, following their trajectories.

"Send them back!"

Espeon and Golduck pulsed with energy that rippled the air and warped Gary's vision. He trusted Arcanine to keep him safe while he directed his Pokémon's attacks, aiming for the falling rocks. Golduck caught two with Confusion, and Espeon bristled with a Psychic attack that reversed the rocks' paths and sent them careening back for the ones responsible. The boulders struck the top of Wall Trophonius with enough force to crack it. The Fighters and their trainers standing near the edge lost their footing, and some of them fell. A Machoke skidded against the vertical wall, each point of contact a sickening slap, and landed with a soft thud on the ground. It was joined by three human trainers. None of them got up again.

But the boulders kept coming. The Fighters knew no bounds to their physical strength and stamina, and so high up, they were virtually untouchable to the Celadon forces' Pokémon. Gary could only do so much with Espeon and Golduck.

Scizor, get up there!

The red mantis fluttered its translucent wings, splattering the blood of

the fallen onto the golden grass. It scanned the top of the wall with calculating, red eyes and began to buzz. In an untraceable blur of light and celerity, the big Bug took off toward the wall and began to crawl up it. Some of Erika's soldiers began discharging crossbow bolts at the attackers on the wall, but they fell just short. Scizor, however, did not. Someone screamed when it reached the top and began Fury Cutting its way through the trainers. It was stopped by a hefty Hitmonchan that impeded its progress with a flurry of Fire Punches. Scizor hissed and backpedalled, unwilling to suffer a lethal burn.

U-Turn!

The command echoed in Scizor's head, and it ducked down and lunged with blinding speed at Hitmonchan. The Fighter swung and grazed Scizor with its Fire Punch, but it opened itself up for a quick and dirty feint. Scizor spun around the disoriented Fighter and trampled it with its weight. Hitmonchan struggled for all of two seconds under Scizor's girth before falling flat on its face and coming under the merciless power of steel-tipped pincers and a hungry mouth.

"Gary, watch it!"

Ash's warning came too late, and the Saffron soldier charging him swung a long machete at his head. Arcanine reared and kicked up fire to protect Gary, but just as the soldier was about to slash through Arcanine's chest, something swooped in out of nowhere and scooped him up in large, red talons. A Flyer Gary didn't recognize took to the sky, flew as high as Wall Trophonius, and dumped the soldier near where Scizor was feasting on Hitmonchan's remains. The guy screamed and flailed, but he could do nothing to stop his crash-land into his fellow Saffron defenders atop the wall, sending them falling over the inside edge.

"Move!"

A familiar voice was followed up by three thick jets of water that cut through the thick of the humans' battle, disorienting everyone and opening them up to attacks from Erika directly.

"Petal Dance!" she shouted.

Her Venusaur growled low and guttural as the pale, yellow flower on its back bloomed wider and released a flurry of petals that swept up in a directed vortex toward the Saffron soldiers. Severed pieces of corn crops went flying and filled the air with kernels and leaves splattered with the blood of the enemy.

"Misty!" Gary said.

Misty, along with Starmie and Vaporeon, ran toward him with Violet and her Blastoise. Daisy was farther back, flanking the Saffron forces with a pair of Dewgong and a handful of sleek, armored trainers Gary recognized from his time living at the Cerulean Gym.

"We brought friends," she said, giving him a hand down from Arcanine's back.

Weathered faces dusted with dirt and sweat but showing no signs of fatigue brought up the rear behind the Cerulean reinforcements. They brought with them an array of Rock- and Ground-type Pokémon, from mighty Graveler to sturdy Rhyhorn to even a twenty-foot Onix. The rock snake's obsidian body was streaked with veins of rose quartz and ruby that pulsed like blood when it roared. A young man rode the Onix behind its head and shouted for it to use Stone Edge. The ground split under Onix's scythe-like tail, eliciting more screams from both sides of the fighting.

"We have to go through Wall Trophonius," Gary said.

"Leave that to Brock."

The unfamiliar Flyer swooped in again and landed near Misty, Violet, and Gary. It fluffed its bright blue and yellow feathers and turned a golden eye on Gary. Its rusty red tail swept over the ground and cut into it like a lash.

"What the hell is that thing?"

Ivy joined them in a small respite from the fighting as the Celadon forces, now bolstered by the Cerulean and Pewter reinforcements, overpowered the Saffron soldiers and pushed them farther back toward the wall.

Brock grinned. "This is Archeops, the only one of its kind alive today. Got him from my dad when he came back from a long stay in Unova as a thanks for clearing Team Rocket out of Pewter. Apparently, he charmed the pants off Professor Aurea Juniper. And by charmed I mean he convinced her to sleep with—"

"Okay, we get the picture," Misty said.

Archeops, about Charizard's size, towered over Brock and kept a weather eye on the battlefield, squawking in warning.

"We need to get through the wall," Ivy said. "Now."

"Hold on," Gary said. "This has been way too easy. I have a bad feeling about what's waiting on the other side, but I can't see past the wall with Sabrina's Psychics blocking me out."

"Then there's only one solution. We break it down and find out for ourselves." Erika, still atop her Venusaur and flanked by Exeggutor and Victreebel along with a few of her warrior trainers, drew up to the group. "Brock. Misty."

"Erika," Misty said, eyes narrowed. "Been a while."

Erika shifted her attention to Gary and Ivy. "We must move quickly before Saffron can regroup or adapt their strategy."

"Leave that to me," Brock said, reaching for a Pokéball at his belt.

"Hey where's Ash?" Misty asked.

Daisy and the rest of the Cerulean Gym trainers had cornered the remaining Saffron soldiers and their Pokémon on one side, while Ash cut off their escape alongside the Celadon foot soldiers. Charizard, Blastoise, and Venusaur worked together to surround them and, on Ash's command, unleashed a devastating combination of fire, water, and Razor Leaf that decimated the opposition's defending Taurus and Golem.

"Ash looks fine. Erika's right, we have to hurry," Ivy said.

Brock threw a Pokéball, and Gary stumbled backward to avoid getting buried under the living goliath that rose forty feet above ground. He shielded his eyes as the sun's glare reflected off the enormous rock snake's platinum hide. Arcanine whimpered next to him and raised its hackles.

"Steelix!" Brock shouted up to the colossal Pokémon. "Take out that wall!"

Steelix slowly turned its heavy head toward the wall, and the few soldiers and Pokémon that remained on top began to scramble down the other side on ropes, shouting in fear. The young guy riding the Onix, who turned out to be Brock's brother, Forrest, ordered Onix to follow Steelix's lead and head for the wall.

The two rock snakes decimated the fertile land and corn crops in their

path while the rest of the Celadon, Cerulean, and Pewter forces followed close behind. When they reached Wall Trophonius, both Steelix and Onix began whaling on the grey stone with gusto. With each ear-splitting blow, more of the stone cracked, and deep crags began to form along the stone's impurities.

Boom, boom, boom.

Wall Trophonius began to crumble and cave in on itself under Steelix and Onix's relentless siege. Brock mounted Archeops again and flew the ancient bird in an arc just below the top of the wall to avoid detection. Steelix crouched down and, in a stunning display of brute strength, rammed the remainder of the stone wall with its iron head. Any resistance the barrier had left in it was reduced to shambles as a breach at least fifty yards in length opened up along the wall.

"Forward!" Erika shouted over the dust and debris that inundated the length of the opening.

Gary ran alongside Arcanine and recalled the slower Nidoking as he passed the big rodent. Espeon's telepathy picked up on Scizor scaling the crumbling wall, where it leaped from Steelix's back and then to Onix's on its way back to the ground.

At first, nothing much happened as Gary focused on putting one foot in front of the other. Espeon and Golduck detected nothing amiss, but as he came upon the other side of Wall Trophonius, it was as if he was running through waist-deep water. Something was pushing back.

"Look out!"

Ivy slammed into him, knife drawn, just as a thick, calloused foot came down in a High Jump Kick that hit her in the shoulder. She slashed with her knife, but the Hitmonlee was damn fast and narrowly avoided her blade as she crumpled to the ground. The shoulder shell of her armor had cracked and fell apart under the Fighter's unmatched, concentrated strength, and she clutched it with her other hand.

"Psychic!" Gary shouted.

Espeon released a silvery wave that cut to Hitmonlee's very soul and sent it flying. Arcanine bounded after it, aflame, and ran it over. But the orange canine didn't stop there and stampeded right on through to Hitmonlee's trainer, as well as a small Primeape that had hung back. Flame Wheel burned the Primeape alive, but Arcanine's wide paws

trampled the trainer to death before he could suffer the heat.

With the dust settled, the residential part of Saffron came into stark relief. Fighters abounded, more than Gary had ever seen gathered in one place. A slew of Hitmonlee and Machoke dashed straight for Steelix and Onix, but Misty and her Water trainers took turns shooting them out of the sky with well-aimed water jets.

"Ivy." Gary helped her stand, but she pushed him off.

"I'm fine. Worry about yourself."

"You're not fine."

"I'm not dead. So seriously, concentrate on the fight—"

An entire house still filled with its screaming residents rose from the ground on invisible strings and hurtled toward the bulk of the invading army. Erika, Lara, and a few other warrior trainers were right in the house's trajectory, scrambling to move but not fast enough. A tri-colored combination blast of fire, water, and a white-hot Solar Beam shot at the side of the house and blew a hole in it with enough force to knock it off course and send it crashing into a convenience store nearby. Some people managed to scramble out of the ruin in various states of life and death.

Ash caught up with Erika with Charizard, Blastoise, and Venusaur right behind him. "Stay low and target the Fighters!" he shouted up to Charizard.

The winged reptile roared and took off into the thick of battle, spewing molten fire and leaving a trail of screams and smoking bones.

"Psychics," Ivy spat. "I can smell them."

"They're behind Wall Dodona," Gary said. "Just as I thought, they're staying outta harm's way and sending the Fighters to do their dirty work for them."

"They want dirty? We'll give 'em dirty."

Brock flew overhead and guided Steelix and Onix toward Wall Dodona, which was alabaster white and three hundred feet tall. But resilient Fighters flew at the slow-moving behemoths and rammed them with precision kicks and punches that slowly but steadily chipped away at their stamina.

"C'mon!" She beckoned Tyranitar and Houndoom to follow and released Crobat. "Keep those Fighters away from Steelix!"

Crobat took off like a purple bullet and, without the need to worry about a rider on its back, let loose with a devastating Air Cutter that sliced through a charging Machamp just as it made to punch Steelix with everything it had. Razor wind tore two of its four arms clean off and drew a deep, weeping gash down its chest all the way to its thigh, crippling it where it stood.

Fires broke out, civilians took to the streets in search of shelter only to wind up in a cross bow's path or as collateral to an errant Razor Leaf. The main street to Wall Dodona was a straight shot a few miles long, and the invaders moved slowly. Too slowly. From the other side of the wall, the Psychic trainers focused their efforts on hindering progress wherever possible. They uprooted lamp posts, entire houses, even screaming people to throw at the invaders. For every mile the resistance gained against Saffron, people and Pokémon dropped like flies.

A lamp post narrowly avoided Erika's Victreebel, but a skilled trainer and her loyal Heracross came at it fearlessly. Heracross pierced the pitcher plant's porous hide with Megahorn and tossed Victreebel clean over its head, where it collided with one of the Pewter trainers' Rhyhorn. Green blood oozed from Victreebel's mortal wound, and it fell still over the smaller Rhyhorn, suffocating it with its bulk and the poison that leaked from its mouth.

Erika, rage and adrenaline spurring her forward in the face of Victreebel's untimely demise, went after the trainer herself, sword flying, but the girl was a Bellatrix, a naturally skilled Fighting-type Tamer beyond the abilities of even formally trained warriors. She subdued Erika with lightning speed and turned her sword on her, but Lara flew in and tackled her in a rage. Heracross came to its trainer's aid and jumped on Lara's back, where it sank its hidden fangs into the soft joints of her armor at the shoulder.

"Petal Dance!"

Erika's Venusaur growled and released a flurry of golden petals that hit not only the enemy Tamer and her Heracross, but also Lara and herself. Erika shielded her face and tackled Lara to the ground, forcing Heracross to abandon its attack and open itself up to the brutal Petal Dance that was sharp enough to slice through its reinforced carapace.

"Throw her!" Erika commanded.

Thick vines slithered from Venusaur's back and wrapped around the female trainer, lifting her through the vortex of knife-like petals. Then it tossed her aside through the second story window of a nearby house, where she remained, unmoving and bleeding out.

"Erika," Lara said, shaking.

Erika's face was badly cut up and bleeding, but she barely noticed as she helped the woman stand. "Can you walk?"

Lara nodded. "I'm okay. But you got hit. And Victreebel—"

"I'm fine. We have to push forward."

Victreebel lay in a heap several yards away, its fly trap hanging open and leaking poisonous drool. Already, its dark eyes had begun to glaze with a sticky film that would attract carrion pests. Erika set her jaw and looked away.

"We have to push forward," she said more to herself than to Lara as she returned to Venusaur on autopilot and hoisted Lara onto its back. "Exeggutor."

The Coconut Pokémon lumbered up next to her and swiveled all six of its eyes to try to see her. She glared down the street, where more Fighters and their trainers, Bellators and otherwise, amassed and got ready to launch a coordinated attack on the advancing Steelix and Onix before they could reach Wall Dodona.

"Solar Beam."

Exeggutor's palm crown quivered as it absorbed the bright sunlight overhead, and Erika laid her palms flat against its bark-encrusted back, lending it her own strength of aura. Exeggutor released the Solar Beam as a shaft of pure, unfiltered sunlight, deadly concentrated and so potent that it burned up the people and Pokémon in its path about sixty feet ahead. They immolated where they stood, sunburned to a crisp and none the wiser. Erika swayed and held onto Exeggutor for balance as she panted and wiped the dripping blood from her lip.

"Forward," she managed.

Her warriors rallied, and forward they moved.

Ash found himself playing a game of hide and seek with the Fighters in his path. They acted under duress, and for that he couldn't bring himself to kill first, ask questions later. But they still acted, and he had a job to do that required he remain alive. Gengar's Aura veiled his physical form in indigo light but sharpened his eyes. The Tamers became bright spots in his vision, Bellators that flamed with an earthy, burgundy glow. He avoided them at all costs.

"Aqua Jet!" he called to Blastoise, pointing.

The bulky, blue turtle obeyed and shot a pressurized water canon at the sidewalk, which forced the Pokémon and trainers in the streets to abscond into the alleys or face the full might of a pissed off Blastoise. With Ivy and Gary working with the Cerulean trainers to neutralize the direct threats to Steelix and Onix, Ash was left to look ahead. But when Gengar screeched in his head out of nowhere and momentarily robbed Ash of his motor controls to scoop up Pikachu and leap as high as he could, Ash was forced to watch as a scorching Solar Beam tore through the street below and incinerated the trainers in its path ahead.

"Holy shit!"

Pikachu squeaked in terror at the sight and from vertigo as Gengar floated them a good thirty feet off the ground. Erika was closing in behind him more determined than she'd been before the breach of Wall Trophonius. Sensing the change, more inanimate objects magically uprooted themselves and hurtled for her, stopped only by the coordinated efforts of a slew of Vine Whips.

From his vantage, Ash made out Wall Dodona's metal gate, which had opened just enough to allow people to pass through. Curious, he drifted to the roof of a house in its direct path and squinted. "The hell?"

Understanding dawned when he made out the black uniforms that quickly scattered and flooded the streets. Cursing, he searched around for Charizard. The orange lizard was circling above with an eye on Blastoise and Venusaur. Ash raised two fingers to his lips and whistled. With a belch of smoke, Charizard touched down on the roof next to Ash and snarled.

"No saddle this time, be happy," Ash said as he swung a leg over Charizard's bare back, silently thanking whoever designed the Brigandine model armor for the extra padding and protection around

the groin area. Charizard's glossy scales were as sharp and tough as shaved shale.

Just as soon as Ash and Pikachu got their grips, Charizard lifted off and angled for the approaching horde of Rocket Grunts, who had already begun releasing all manner of Pokémon to do battle. Ash bared his teeth in rage at them and tightened his grip on Charizard's neck.

"Fire Blast!"

Charizard swooped in low and breathed a stream of blue fire upon the Rocket Grunts' front line that heated the cobblestone street at their feet to a soft, molten gel. The ones unlucky enough be in front tried to scatter, but a few fell face first into the congealing lava where parts of their heads and chests melted, uniform and skin and bone. Their howls spooked the Grunts in back, who were quick to release their Pokémon and fight back. Charizard banked a hard right to avoid a deadly Gunk Shot from a boiling Muk.

"Pikachu!"

A thick, yellow lightning bolt arced from Pikachu, who was latched onto Ash's back, to the dispersing crowd below and managed to electrocute three or four of them as Charizard swooped by. Some Rocket Grunts dashed into alleyways or even broke down doors to get inside residences, anything to escape the elemental siege.

"Woo!" Ash whooped as Charizard angled skyward and made to turn for another sweep.

But the Grunts were not about to be taken for a ride again, and they threw Pokéballs two and three at a time with revenge in their sights. Two great Fearow, a Noctowl, and three Golbat took to the skies and all chased after Charizard. Ash swore under his breath.

"Aim for the Fearow!" he shouted back to Pikachu.

Pikachu once again sparked and sent a wicked lightning bolt over Ash's head, but the Fearow were fast and avoided it. Gengar, a black mist trailing behind Ash like a cape, opened its lurid eyes and burst out laughing as it rocketed toward one of the Fearow. The large bird cawed in fear and tried to bank left, but Gengar, unhindered by whipping winds and gravity, expanded into a cloud of noxious gas that swallowed Fearow whole. Ash couldn't make out much within the cloud, but Fearow's frantic squawking and flashes of spectral teeth

were enough to get the idea. In a matter of seconds, Fearow's carcass fell to the ground as a mangled, bloody mess of feather and bone, barely recognizable. Rocket Grunts below scattered, but the carcass fell on top of a young, female Grunt and flattened her with a smack on the pavement.

The other Fearow gave Gengar and Charizard a wide berth after witnessing what had befallen its twin, but the three Golbat whipped by Charizard in successive Wing Attacks. Ash held on for dear life as Charizard swooped and spun to avoid the blows. Gengar regrouped and attempted to return to Ash, but the Noctowl, glowing blue with Confusion, flew straight through the Ghost and dispersed it with an angry hoot.

"Gengar!"

Wall Dodona loomed high above, blinding white, and Charizard pulled up hard to fly parallel with it straight up. Ash's eyes watered even through his goggles, and Pikachu's small but sharp nails dug into his shoulders deeply enough to draw blood. Two of the Golbat flanked Charizard as it flew higher, catching up fast. Ash gritted his teeth as his vision blurred with vertigo and whiplash. He reached a hand around toward Pikachu and fisted the scruff of the yellow rodent's neck.

"Give 'em hell, Charizard!" he shouted over the whipping winds.

And he let go.

At first, he was still defying gravity and hurtling ever higher, but in the blink of an eye Charizard's flaming tail bypassed him as its powerful wings carried it higher faster without the added weight of a rider. Gravity caught up to Ash and he fell backwards, clutching Pikachu to his chest. The third Golbat raced past him, tongue lolling, and spilled drool across his face and chest as it looked back at him. Above, Charizard spun in mid-air and caught the updraft on its spread wings. It threw back its horned head in a roar and spat out a Flamethrower that swept almost 180 degrees in front of it from left to right. The Golbat screeched as they attempted to fly out of the line of fire, but in their relentless pursuit they'd drawn too close to Charizard and suffered its fiery vengeance. One was completely consumed by the flames and burned to a lumpy crisp before falling against the alabaster wall and tumbling to the ground. It left a black and red skid mark on the pristine wall behind it.

Another got its wing incinerated and was unable to remain airborne. It screamed and began somersaulting through the air at terminal velocity to the ground far below. The third had managed to stay behind far enough to avoid the worst of the attack and suffered only surface burns. Enraged, the final Golbat veered off course and headed back for Ash himself.

In the short three or four seconds it had taken Charizard to eliminate the Golbat, Ash and Pikachu continued to fall at ever increasing speeds, now with new enemy in pursuit. Gengar was still recovering from the Confusion, and the remaining Fearow also honed in on Ash and Pikachu with a hungry squawk.

Ash shielded his face with an arm just as the Golbat was nearly upon him, but a crackling jolt of electricity slammed into it and fried it just a couple feet over Ash's head. The blue bat's eyes burst in its skull, and its tongue broke out with boils that popped and sprayed Ash with blood and pous. Before he had time to react, another Thunderbolt streaked toward Fearow, which it dodged, but as the bolts kept coming from different directions and at increasing speed and intensity, the great bird had nowhere to go and took the lighting attacks in its back. Something rammed Ash from the side and closed large talons around his middle just before he crashed through the roof of a house.

Wood and clay shingles exploded at his back and knocked the wind out of him, but something hot and more forgiving than the ground cushioned his fall. Coughing, Ash let go of Pikachu, who scampered out of his arms and onto the floor, squeaking frantically. Something shifted under him with a groan, and Ash rolled off his savior.

"Charizard," he said, dazed from the fall.

The orange pseudo-Dragon had caught him just in time and crashed through the roof of someone's house. Its tough wings had spared Ash the brutality of the fall and shielded him from harm. Smoke rose from its nostrils as it huffed and rolled over onto its four legs, reptilian eyes narrowed down at Ash like saving his life had been the day's most egregious inconvenience thus far.

Ash removed his goggles and wiped the Golbat guts from his face before throwing his arms around the stubborn lizard. "Thanks, buddy. I knew you secretly liked me."

Charizard snorted and rose up on its hind legs to shake broken shingles and wood from its back. Blood leaked from between its

hardened scales, but Charizard was a tough old bastard and seemed to play it off like it hadn't just crash-landed through an attic at terminal velocity.

Pikachu was still squeaking like its life depended on it, and it ran to the window of the attic. Ash went to see what had it so preoccupied, and when he looked outside his spirits lifted.

"It's Surge and the Vermilion trainers," he said, grinning. "Looks like Jenny's with 'em. C'mon!"

Ash recalled Charizard and made his way downstairs to the house's front door. He passed by a cowering family hiding behind their living room couch, mumbled a brief apology about the hole in the roof, and ran outside with Pikachu. Just down the street, the Rocket Grunts were cramped for space as they tried to battle their way past Jenny and her revitalized Lavender Police Force. Her Arcanine ran through a small crowd of six or seven Grunts and scattered them with Flame Wheel, while some of the other police officers attacked with metal bats and swords.

"So, still alive, eh kid?"

Ash whirled and smiled like an idiot. "Surge! Man, am I glad to see you."

"Your Charizard's got some balls. I saw how it hauled ass to get to you and make sure you landed on a house 'stead o' the ground."

Surge was flanked by Electabuzz and Raichu, and two Magneton hovered over his head, their vacuous eyes scanning the sky and the streets for signs of trouble.

"You're just in time. We're clearing the way for Brock's Steelix to blast through Wall Dodona."

Surge spat on the ground. "Save yourself the trouble and have that thing break down the gate. Less effort, and we can kill some Rockets on the way."

"Ash Ketchum."

Erika appeared around the corner with Exeggutor and some of her personal guard, along with Ash's Blastoise and Venusaur. The two Pokémon were scuffed up, and Venusaur bore a thick gash on its front right foot.

"Erika, shit, what happened?"

Her pretty face was streaked with old blood and new, and there was a tried and tireless glint in her dark eyes that brooked no patience. "War happened. And the day's not over yet." She shifted her gaze to Surge and his Pokémon. "Lieutenant, good of you to join us."

"I gotta say, I never took you for the hands-on type, Erika. But for what it's worth, I'm glad I was wrong." He paused and gave her a once-over, noting her injuries and the scrappy Pokémon that had remained at her side. "Very wrong."

"So long as Sabrina and Team Rocket hold Saffron hostage, none of our jurisdictions are safe. There's no greater purpose for which to prove our mettle as Gym Leaders."

"I'll drink to that when we finish cleanin' out this shit hole. Sandra! Get over here!"

Sandra and several other trainers Ash didn't recognize but who were all armed to the teeth jogged to attention. They saluted like they'd rehearsed the action, and Sandra's Electrode sparked as it rolled along next to her.

"We're gonna clear a path to the gate for that." Surge pointed to the Steelix and Onix still making their way to the wall not far behind. "I don't want no surprises waitin' for 'em when they get here. Understood?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

He turned back to Erika. "Listen here. When we bust through that gate, we're gonna be in for the worst hell o' the day."

"What makes you say that?" Ash asked.

"'Cause the bigger the wall, the bigger the risk to Saffron if it falls. Sabrina's no fool. We ain't seen much of her Psychic army 'cause they're waitin' to strike when we're all spent. All this," he gestured to the ruinous warfare all around him, "it's just the appetizer. The real shit's on the other side, you mark my words."

"Then do you have something to propose?" Erika asked.

"I assume y'all got a plan to take out Sabrina and the assholes hiding behind her skirt in Silph?"

"Yeah," Ash said. "You're lookin' at him."

Surge frowned and then burst out laughing. "You gotta be kiddin' me. *You're* gonna take out Sabrina?"

"No, that's the Reaper's job," Erika said. "Ash will infiltrate Silph, *quietly*."

"Oh, right, 'cause that just makes a fuckton more sense. Are you outta your goddamned mind, kid? You can't just barge in on your own. Remember, I know the top brass, and I know what they're capable of."

"I handled Proton just fine in Lavender."

"You mean, you let that little bitch get away even with Agatha's help."

"Gentlemen," Erika interrupted. "Less arguing and more focusing on what's actually important. They're nearly here."

Steelix and Onix were only blocks away and still contending with the legion of Fighters.

"Well, if it's a path we need, I got just the guy to help clear it." Ash recalled Blastoise and Venusaur in favor of Snorlax, who landed on the ground with a mighty crash.

The air in front of Ash began to ripple as a shadowy hand materialized from thin air. Gengar slowly manifested, shaken from the direct hit it had taken. Ash reached for the Ghost and let it dwell within him. He shuddered as though a sudden draft blew the back of his bare neck.

"Then we're agreed," Erika said. "I'll alert Brock."

She released her Vileplume from its Pokéball, The flowering crown on its head spread fleshy, fuchsia petals in a magnificent bloom as it fixed its red eyes on its master.

"Solar Beam," Erika commanded. She pointed to the sky directly overhead.

Vileplume's flower crown trembled and bloomed as the petals glowed with solar energy. Ash pushed Surge back to avoid shockwave as the powerful shaft of light concentrated on Vileplume's head and shot up like a laser, up and up until it faded into the endless blue. In the distance, Steelix noticed the light and roared. It changed its trajectory and led Onix in a beeline toward the gate.

"Here we go," Ash said.

Ivy grunted with effort as she yanked her hunting knife out of a Rocket Grunt's skull. His three Ekans slithered about without a purpose now that their trainer was done for, and Houndoom made short work of them with a tried and true Fire Fang. It pulled one of the Ekans apart by the tail as it crushed the head with its thick paw and slurped up the charred meat like spaghetti.

The Fighters kept coming, their will to win unmatched. Nearby, Misty stabbed one of the Bellators with a spear she'd acquired from Erika's forces and impaled the man at the shoulder.

"Where's Master Itosu Anko?" she demanded.

The Bellator bared his teeth and merely grunted for his Hitmontop to pummel Misty with a spinning kick. Starmie's dinner plate-sized jewel pulsed with crimson light and stopped the Hitmontop in its tracks. The valiant Fighter floated off the ground and spun faster and faster until its small body could not handle the centrifugal force, and Starmie's Psychic energy literally ripped it limb from limb.

"We're here to free him!" Misty said. "Talk to me!"

The man coughed up blood. "You can't. No one can. She'll stop you."

Ivy, who'd overheard the conversation, pulled Misty's spear clear and hauled the Bellator trainer up by his collar. She held his scarred face close and glared up at him.

"You let us worry about Sabrina. Now, where the hell's your master? If we free him, will you fight with us?"

He looked between Ivy and Misty, who hovered just behind her. "We hold no loyalty to the Delphi."

"I'll take that as a yes."

"Tell us how to free him," Misty said, "and we'll let you live."

"My life means nothing," the Bellator said. "But...Master Anko's life means everything. He's being held at the Dojo, past Wall Dodona." He put his heavy hands on Ivy's wrists, but not to fight back. "Please, if you can save him, we'll help you take back Saffron."

"Then spread the word," Misty said. "Any Fighter who helps us will see their master freed and reinstated."

"Misty," Ivy hissed.

"*I'll* guarantee it," she shot back. "As the Cerulean Gym Leader, I have an interest in the Dojo's reinstatement."

The Bellator looked between the two women. "You have my word. I'll do what I can."

"Good. Let him go."

Ivy threw him down on the ground and whirled on Misty. "You can't just go deciding this shit like you're in charge."

"I'm a Gym Leader, in case you forgot. I can do whatever the hell I want. And I want the Dojo's trainers back in power. At least they're not Team Rocket."

Ivy bared her teeth, but the argument was sound and something Erika had also alluded to in their negotiations. To trust the enemy currently doing everything in its power to thwart their cause, though, was asking too much.

"I'll spread the word," the Bellator said. He was a young man with blond hair tied back in a high ponytail and a square jaw, not much older than Ivy herself.

"What's your name?" Ivy said.

"Yusuke. Yusuke Iwaishi."

"Well, Yusuke, you tell him," she pointed to Gary, who was fighting a couple blocks away, "what you told me, and if he believes you, then we have a deal. He'll make sure your master sees the light of day again."

Yusuke nodded and raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Thank you."

He ran off, one hand clutching his injured shoulder, and headed for where Gary was fighting.

"Hey, look!" Misty pointed to the northeast where a column of white-hot light shot into the sky.

"That's a Solar Beam. Erika?"

"She's the only one packing that kinda power. Look, the gate to Wall Dodona's beyond her."

"Then she must've found a way through. That'd be easier for Brock to get through than solid rock."

"I'll get my trainers." Misty ran off toward the group of Cerulean Gym trainers flanking Onix and Steelix.

"And I'll tell Brock." Ivy recalled Tyranitar and Houndoom and raised a hand to signal Crobat. "Batty, to me!"

A purple streak whizzed by in a blur before circling around and coming to a graceful stop in front of Ivy. She patted the big bat behind the ear and readjusted its eyepatch, which had come loose in the commotion. She swung a leg over Crobat's back, settled into the saddle, and pulled on her goggles, and soon she was airborne with a bird's eye view of the battlezone below. Brock flew near Steelix not far away, and Ivy steered Crobat in his direction.

"Looks like we got a new target!" she shouted over the wind current.

"I noticed!" Brock called back. "Let's make this fast before they can throw anything else at us!"

He signaled to Steelix, and the great, platinum snake shifted course and aimed for the gate of Wall Dodona. Ivy zipped ahead on Crobat to the gate, where she spotted Ash on the ground along with Erika, some of the Celadon warriors, Surge, and Jenny. Snorlax was leading the charge against more Rocket Grunts that had poured out from Wall Dodona, and Ivy narrowed her eyes at them.

"Let's say hello, Batty. Sludge Bomb!"

Crobat inhaled deeply and spat out a thick glob of venomous gunk that hurtled for the Rocket Grunts and their various Pokémon below. It hit a Dodrio and spilled over a couple trainers, eliciting cries of agony and smoking entrails as the poison did its work.

Despite their massive size, Onix and Steelix made good time to the gate. Whether or not Yusuke had anything to do with the Fighters' anabasis was anyone's guess, and Ivy wasn't holding her breath. But soon the big snakes were upon the gate and ready to break it down.

"Iron Tail!" Brock shouted.

Steelix roared and lowered its head to grant its deadly tail the space and momentum needed to ram the gate. Forrest's Onix was quick to follow with a tail whipping of its own. The metal gate whined under the measured assault.

Ivy landed Crobat near where Ash was commanding Snorlax to Hyper Beam and Body Slam its way through the resisting Rocket Grunts. She had to step over a maimed corpse that jerked unconsciously. The Grunt was covered in electrical burns and bled from his eyes.

"Ash, it's time for us to get moving. Soon as that gate's toast."

"Yeah, I know. Did you talk to Gary?"

"There's no time. We have to be ready. We may only have this one chance to bypass the Psychics. Can you handle it?"

Gengar rose from Ash's back and grinned down at Ivy.

"I'm pretty sure we can manage," he said with a grin that rivaled the Ghost's.

"Cocky shit."

"Hey." He grabbed her hand and held fast. "You can do this. Hell, if I were Sabrina, I'd be pissing myself knowing you're comin' after me."

"It's not a matter of can or can't; we just have to do it. Gary's counting on us." She tossed out a Pokéball and Umbreon appeared on nimble paws, ears laid flat on its back as it smelled the carnage.

"Ivy!"

Officer Jenny bounded toward the duo atop her Arcanine, who was bleeding from various lacerations in its thick fur but still found the energy to hold its regal head high.

"I hear you two will be leading the attacks on the Gym and Silph."

"Yeah," Ivy said. "We're going for the head and the heart, so we could use some reliable backup."

Jenny grinned and patted Arcanine's mane. The big canine panted, oblivious to the grime and dried blood that caked patches of its magnificent fur. "I think we can manage to give you a proper send-off.

Right, boys?"

Several uniformed men had tailed Jenny, some of the new officers she'd recruited for the Lavender Police Department.

"Captain!"

Screams broke out near the gate, or what was left of it. Onix and Steelix had decimated it and left a gaping hole in Wall Dodona, where the resistance forces were quick to stampede through. The Celadon army was first, followed by Vermilion and the Lavender Police Department, and finally Misty, her sisters, and Gary brought up the rear with the Cerulean and Pewter forces. Ash switched out Snorlax for Charizard and took to the sky with Ivy in tow, and they soared at a low altitude just over the resistance's heads. Gengar dissolved into a spectral cloud that cloaked Ash, Pikachu, and Charizard in a violet haze, while Umbreon sat on Ivy's lap and scanned for signs of Psychics.

They were the first through the gate and zipped to the other side of Wall Dodona. Onix roared behind them as it began to levitate, and the Psychic energy manipulating it flung it back toward the wall, causing a rockslide where it hit the side of the wall. The invaders scrambled to protect themselves from the ruthless assault, but to little avail.

Ivy and Ash had no time to turn back, though, as Wall Pythia loomed five hundred feet tall just ahead in all its ebony glory, black as pitch. Below, they passed over the wealthier districts of Saffron and key locations, including the Dojo where a number of trainers were positioned on the roof flanked by humanoid Pokémon that remained very still.

"Ash!" Ivy shouted over the whipping winds.

A thick, silvery beam of light shot through the air, aiming for the two Flyers. The small legion of Kadabra, Drowzee, and Mr. Mime on the roof of the Dojo fired off Psybeams and Psychics in rapid succession. Crobat screeched when a wave of telekinetic energy rippled toward it like a tsunami.

"Dark Pulse!"

Umbreon hissed and needled its black fur as a stygian wave of pure darkness exploded outward in all directions, dispelling the Psychic attack and scaring the living hell out of a Kadabra that narrowly avoided the backlash.

"It's okay, Batty, we're almost there," she said, patting the huge bat for reassurance.

Crobat picked up speed and left Charizard in the dust as it zoomed as fast as it could for Wall Pythia. Psybeams continued to rise like searchlights, but Ivy couldn't pick out the culprits that hid themselves in order to avoid direct confrontation. She clutched Umbreon close and pressed herself as close to Crobat as possible, trusting it to dodge the incoming attacks with its expert spins and plunges over her stomach's protests. Wall Pythia loomed dead ahead, and Ivy squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to think about crashing into it at such a high speed. But Crobat pulled up in an almost vertical ascent, ever the skilled acrobat, and scaled the great wall with ease.

Almost there!

They cleared the wall's crown, and for a brief second the glittering, glass skyscraper that housed Silph headquarters came into view straight ahead. Umbreon pulsed without warning, but it was just a fraction of a second too late to stop the full effects of the monstrous Psychic attack that slammed into Crobat as it dipped over the wall. With a screech, the purple bat lost its momentum and plummeted over the side of Wall Pythia.

Ivy screamed, and Crobat fought against the chilling wind rush to catch an updraft, but it convulsed with the super effective consequences of the direct hit. She managed to recall Umbreon before it lost its hold, but Crobat continued to struggle in the air. Ivy pulled up on the saddle with all her might.

"Batty!"

In a last ditch effort, Crobat spread both sets of wings and fired off an Air Cutter at the ground. They swerved in mid air, but there was no updraft to catch and they hurtled headfirst for a brick warehouse south of Sabrina's Gym. With only seconds to gamble, Ivy threw any delusion of making it out of this in one piece to the wind and yanked two Pokéballs from her belt. Crobat disappeared within one, and she popped open the second one.

The pavement rushed to meet her, and everything went dark.

Ash was having problems of his own as Gengar's ghastly cloak buffered Charizard against the Psychics' relentless counter siege. Charizard blasted out an almost continuous stream of Flamethrowers

that scattered the trainers on the Dojo's roof, but as soon as Ash approached Wall Pythia, something had wrested control of Charizard's fire and manipulated it into the shape of a gaping maw that chased after it as it banked right and up to scale the wall.

"Oh, shit!"

The fire snapped its intangible jaws, and Pikachu squeaked in fear. Charizard climbed higher, but the pyrokinetic attack was gaining fast.

"Night Shade!"

Gengar expanded into a fearsome fog not unlike a thundercloud, amplifying its cheshire smile and glaring back at the sentient fire with enlarged, red eyes. It opened its huge mouth just as the fire tried to swallow the party and fused with the fire. Something screamed within the hazy, smoking cloud, and all traces of light and heat imploded and disappeared within the darkness.

Ash patted Charizard's neck. "We're goin' in blind! Pikachu!"

Charizard cleared the top of the wall with a mighty whoosh. It spread its wings to hover on the updraft and closed its eyes just as Pikachu let loose a searing Flash attack from Ash's back, shielding them from view. Gengar shrank to nothing but a thin shadow trailing behind.

"Straight ahead!" Ash commanded.

Despite the aftershock of the blinding attack Ash had made the two Pokémon practice together countless times during their training in Cerulean, Charizard shot forward directly for Silph. Below, a few trainers were shouting and stumbling about with their equally dazed Pokémon as they recovered from direct exposure to the Flash. There was no sign of Ivy and Crobat, and Ash assumed she'd made it to the Gym.

"Aim for the top floor!"

Charizard ducked its head and drew up to the glass, where it used its wings to jerk back into an upright position and attack the windows with its sharp claws. Glass shattered on impact, and Charizard crashed through on its four legs.

For a few moments, Ash struggled to get his bearings and remember how to breathe normally. Pikachu hopped off his back and settled next to Charizard, who scanned the room with a low growl of warning.

Glass shards fell from Ash's armor, where a few of the larger shards had managed to rip the joints and get at the few patches of bare skin. One particularly thick shard had by pure bad luck found a weak spot in his armor and stabbed through his thigh. Gritting his teeth to the pain, he pulled it out in one go and bit back a curse. The glass came away with about two inches of blood along its face. He slipped off Charizard's back and quickly tied a tourniquet around his thigh from the small pouch at his thigh to staunch the bleeding. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do.

"President's office, but no president," Ash mused as he scanned the destroyed office and settled on the plaque that had once sat on the now shattered glass desk.

Gengar put its shadowy hands on Ash's shoulder and rose from him. It sent an ominous chill through Ash's frame.

"I know, buddy. If the Admin's not here, then where the hell is he?"

On the bottom-most floor of Silph, Lily steadied herself on one of the iron cell bars.

"So this Silver Wing you were working on," Steven said. "It's finished?"

"Basically. I guess money really can buy anything, even a rush-ordered reconstruction. There's just a little bit left to do, but they don't need me for it when Santos can handle it on his own."

Steven leaned on the opposite wall with his arms crossed as he processed the information. Upon request, Lily had recounted to him every detail of what had transpired in the Silph labs above over the last few days.

"Then it's just as I suspected. They planned this from the beginning."

Lily frowned at his cryptic words. "What do you mean you suspected?"

The elevator dinged and the doors opened to reveal Big Tim. Lily instantly pressed herself to the back wall.

"I don't understand, it's done," she whispered. "Why's he here?" She spun the steel ring on her thumb nervously.

Steven let his arms fall and eyed the ring on her thumb. "Because you're no longer needed."

Before Lily could respond to that, Big Tim arrived at the cell door and glared down at Lily through the bars. His lower lip jutted out and fluttered a little with each rattling breath he drew.

"Woman," he said. "Time is up."

Lily glanced between Big Tim and Steven, but the latter gave her no sign, no reassurances. She swallowed hard. "So, you're here to beat me up again?"

Big Tim smiled and revealed a gold tooth among the others. "Boss man said you're all mine." He cracked his knuckles to drive the message home.

"Well, what about him?" She indicated Steven. "Did he say you could kill him, too?"

"No questions."

Lily remained pressed against the back wall, but Big Tim just stood there. "You know, you have to open that door if you want to get anywhere near me," she taunted. "No way I'm gonna come to you."

Big Tim's smile faded and he grumbled something under his breath. "No funny business."

He fished for the right key on the ring at his belt and unlocked the cell door. It swung out and opened with a creak that made Lily cringe, and Big Tim occupied almost the entire space as he stepped forward into the cell and reached a thickset hand toward her.

With no warning whatsoever, Steven walked briskly to Big Tim and punched him hard in the gut. For someone so comparatively lean and small, beyond all reason and logic Steven somehow managed to knock Big Tim backwards several feet and nearly topple him over. Big Tim heaved and clutched his rotund belly, and when he coughed, blood splattered over his thick lips and onto the concrete floor. Lily had no time for shock when Steven silently closed in on Big Tim, seemingly unfazed by the hard blow. With the confidence of a trained fighter, or perhaps something far more terrifying, he slugged Big Tim in the gut again. But this time, the Grunt was ready to retaliate and doubled over to smother Steven. Whatever hidden strength Steven was packing could not stand unguarded against sheer weight and gravity, and they both fell to the ground in a heap as they grappled.

Lily shrieked in the back of her throat and ran out of the cell without

thinking. She jumped on Big Tim's back and wrapped her skinny arms around his neck, clawing and scratching and trying to choke him the way the spies did in the movies. But she only succeeded in pissing him off even more, and he reared up. Steven rolled out from under him in the distraction, and Big Tim lurched backwards against the bars. Lily cried out in pain as her back smashed between the iron bars, but she held fast and squeezed his neck with all her strength.

Steven let fly another punch at Big Tim's chest cavity, and Lily actually heard the ribs snap and bend as a tremor racked the Grunt's burly body. He staggered and spit more blood, and Steven punched again. The force of his blows was so great that Lily was jostled from Big Tim's neck and scrambled to escape the danger zone. She watched in horror as Big Tim sank to his knees, heaving and drooling blood from his mouth like a fountain. Steven looked down on him with cold, grey eyes, ever silent, and swung one last time. Big Tim's face spun with the blow a sickening ninety degrees to the right like an owl. His face cracked as the bone broke through his flesh, and the sharp edges of his spine ripped through his neck where it had snapped. He fell still and slumped against the cell's bars.

In the silent moments that followed, Steven shook out his hand lightly and wiped the excess blood from his knuckles on the Grunt's shirt. Lily huddled against the opposite end of the cell, too afraid even to breathe as she watched his callous recovery.

"It's time to leave," Steven said in that same, soft spoken whisper that echoed like shouting in her head.

"H-How did you— I mean, he was so *big*, and you just...like he was doll or something. How?"

Steven fixed her with his steely gaze. "Pokémon aren't everything. Have you forgotten that already?"

She shook her head hard enough to make herself dizzy. He gestured to the elevator.

"After you."

It took every ounce of inner strength she could muster to walk by him and not look at Big Tim's mangled remains. The elevator was open and she pressed herself into the corner. Steven followed and hit the 'Close' button, but nothing more.

"We have a common objective, Lily. To that end, you can trust me to

act in your best interests. I assume I can count on you to do the same?"

A hand on her shoulder would have made her jump if not for the sheer weight of it, like a ton of bricks. Resisting the urge to bite her lip, she met his gaze with every intention to appear level-headed and confident before him. "Yes."

His lips curled in a half smile, and he let his hand fall. "What floor is the lab on?"

She pressed the button for the thirty-seventh floor, and the elevator slowly ascended. The lights overhead flickered, and she didn't miss the way Steven's gaze lingered on them.

"We may not have much time," he said.

"Steven."

She waited until he looked down at her.

"What's in this for you? Why would you let yourself get captured?"

"A word of advice. That clever mind you have will serve you best if you keep it to yourself. The smart ones tend to die faster the more they flaunt their genius in front of the enemy."

"Answer the question."

He chuckled. "I told you before. I'm here as a favor to a family friend."

"Must be one hell of a friend for you to go through all this. Did you know about the Silver Wing all along?"

"I confess I did not, though we suspected something of the sort. Instead of posing all these questions to me, though, perhaps you should ask the only one that's relevant."

"And what's that?"

"Who commissioned the project in the first place?"

"Archer said it was for his superiors."

"An ambiguous answer that reveals neither the identity nor the affiliation of these 'superiors'. He let you assume this was a Team Rocket project. Perhaps it is. But there remains a possibility that it

isn't."

"What? Why would Team Rocket spend all this money and go through the trouble of bringing me here if it wasn't for their own gain?"

Steven stared at the blinking LED overhead that counted up the floors, expression hard. "Why, indeed."

The elevator dinged again and the doors opened to the thirty-seventh floor. Archer was standing there, conversing with a woman in a blood-spattered uniform. Her face was pale and perspiring, like she'd just come from a war zone. Archer turned to the elevator and immediately zeroed in on Steven. Lily could almost see the blood drain from his face as his eyes widened and accentuated his horrified pallor.

"You." He reached for his watch and pressed a button on the face. "Katrina, kill him *now*!"

The Grunt reached for a Pokéball at her belt, but Steven was faster and came at her with his fist. She didn't even know what had hit her as she fell to the tiled floor, clutching her gut and dead from the single blow. Archer attempted to retreat to the door and fumbled with his palm at the scanner, but Steven advanced on him and swung again.

Archer was quick and managed to dodge the blow that would have snapped his neck like it had Big Tim's, and Steven's fist ended up in the painted, concrete wall to the side of the door. When he pulled it away, a small crater dented the wall and tiny cracks spider webbed outward from the center, shedding crumbly bits of rock to the floor. Lily gaped at the otherworldly strength of his bare hands, *inhuman* hands, but Archer put distance between Steven and himself. The door to the lab opened from the inside just then and a small team of Rocket Grunts poured out into the small foyer. A blaring alarm went off in the lab, alerting all personnel to the security breach.

"Look out!" Lily said.

Steven was swarmed as the Grunts tried to tackle him with their numbers, but he fought back. Archer wormed his way through the Grunts and disappeared into the lab.

"Stop him!" Steven barked.

Lily, who was smaller and less important than the immediate threat Steven posed, managed to snake in between the battling Grunts, shoving them as she tailed Archer. Someone pulled her long ponytail,

and she kicked back with her leg. Her assailant yelped and let go, and she didn't stick around to give them another opening.

The familiar corridor and its glass-divided labs raced past her as she ran. Archer was just ahead attempting to punch in a code to one of the individual labs. Lily gritted her teeth and picked up speed. When Archer noticed her and how she wasn't slowing down, he tried to reach out and slug her in the face, but Lily ducked her head and rammed him with all her might. Archer grunted just before the two of them crashed through the glass wall of the lab. He broke her fall, but he didn't protect her from the rain of shards that hit her in her already abused back, exacerbating the pain from getting shoved hard into a wall earlier.

Archer groaned, and Lily scrambled to right herself. She shed glass shards from her hair and back and began to search Archer's blazer for her Pokéballs with shaky hands.

"Crazy bitch," he mumbled. He was bleeding from wounds on his back and head where he'd hit the glass.

She ignored him and found the pouch secured to the inside right pocket and yanked it free. The Pokéballs inside jingled around, and she rolled off him to dump them out. Her four Pokémon were accounted for, along with a handful of unfamiliar balls she could only assume belonged to Steven. She grabbed one just as Archer reached around to tackle her to the floor.

"So this is what I get for trusting a lackey to do his job. I have to do *every*thing my*self*!"

Lily struggled under him, but he had her pinned with his legs and moved a hand to her throat. Somewhere behind her, a Grunt crashed into the wall and crawled on his elbows away from the elevator hub.

"P-Please," he whimpered. "I don't wanna die!"

Heavy footsteps approached and revealed Steven looking worse for wear. He bled from several scratches in his face and favored his left arm, but the blood spatters on his armor weren't his. "Everywhere I go, you people are all the same. Fearful sheep happy to follow wolves to the slaughter so long as it's not your own."

Scientists and more Rocket Grunts had begun to pour into the hallway in a panic as the alarm continued to blare. Some had the sense to release their Pokémon, and now a small army of Raticate, Weezing,

and even a rather large Granbull stood between Steven and the way to the Silver Wing lab.

The commotion distracted Archer just long enough for Lily to suck in a desperate breath and toss the Pokéball she'd picked up to Steven. "Catch!"

Steven caught sight of her predicament and instinctively grabbed the Pokéball. He tossed it to the ground and white light bathed the room in a blinding haze momentarily.

"No!" Archer screamed.

Lily began to see stars from the lack of oxygen to her brain, and she could only barely make out the bulky Pokémon that now sat next to Steven. The Grunts and Scientists ordered their Pokémon to attack with Hyper Fangs and Smogs, but Steven's controlled whisper rang out to Lily's ears over the rest.

"Kill them all," he ordered.

The Pokémon at his side, a rugged Metagross with caved-in eyes like something out of a nightmare, began to hum and vibrate as its jagged hide glowed with energy. When it released its attack, the space lit up like a flash bang grenade and the cacophony of bleating Rocket employees drowned in ringing silence. Lily squeezed her eyes shut and prayed.

15. Saffron City, Part 2

Triumvirate, chapter 15: Saffron City, Part 2
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

It was a mad rush through the ruined gates of Wall Dodona to the sprawling suburbs of Saffron's upper middle class and wealthy elite. Arcanine and Scizor led the charge among Gary's Pokémon, while Espeon and Golduck remained at his sides and ready to act at a moment's notice. He passed under the gate with several of the Cerulean and Pewter trainers at the back of the stampede just as the screams of panic broke out. An invisible force yanked Forrest's Onix into the air and flung it like a ragdoll into Wall Dodona directly above the gate. The wall began to crumble and loosed huge slabs of alabaster stone along with Onix itself, and gravity hurtled them both to the ground where many people and Pokémon had yet to clear the gate.

Gary lost all sense of sound and time as he skidded to a stop, eyes to the sky and the falling rocks that would surely kill the hundred or so people and Pokémon still stuck under the gate. He reached for Espeon and Golduck and, in a taxing stretch of the mind that physically hurt his head, picked out Erika's Exeggutor and Misty's Starmie as nearby bright spots of latent, Psychic energy among the crowd. A single thought screamed in his head and theirs that spurred them into action, almost against their wills but without room to deliberate lest they face certain death.

Stop!

A burst of sapphire light flashed like a living, ocean wave and flowed against gravity to collide with the falling rocks. The soldiers and trainers all around Gary continued to run toward Saffron, away from the danger zone, and they made it unscathed as the slabs of rock and Onix itself hovered, suspended overhead on a cushion of blue light. The massive Confusion spanned the length of the gate.

Gary's nose had started to bleed at one point, but he barely noticed as the dazzling, ultramarine light drowned his vision and carried out his will through the Psychic Pokémon spaced out around him.

"Gary!"

Misty was shouting at him near Starmie and pointing somewhere to the north, deeper into Dodona District. He followed her pointing to

the Rocket Grunts closing in on the invading forces with a legion of large Pokémon, from Taurus to Quagsire to Rhydon, that aimed to strike in the midst of the chaos. As though the weight of all the suspended rocks rested on his shoulders, Gary struggled to take one, laborious step to face the incoming Rocket forces. Seeing through more than a dozen eyes at once via the Psychic Pokémon with whom he'd forged a mental link, he focused their sights on the Rockets. Blood spilled down his chin and onto his armor as he flung his arms forward in one fell swoop, and the rock slabs flew forward with him.

Suddenly, the tables had turned and now the Rockets and their allied Psychic trainers were the ones scrambling to safety from the threat of a man made rockslide that flattened anything and everything in its path. Onix landed safely on the ground in front of Gary, disoriented but okay.

As soon as the ivory rock slabs made contact with the ground and the people and Pokémon unlucky enough to be trapped under them, the sapphire light faded and Gary's vision went white for one terrifying second. He sank to the ground and vomited, unable to breathe or think or see.

Hands grabbed at his shoulders and arms and hauled him to his feet as his stomach constricted again and again, but there was nothing left to toss up. He coughed, and tears blurred his eyes from the stress and the acute migraine in his head, like someone had taken a bat to his skull and whaled on him without remorse.

"Oh my god, are you okay, kid?"

Violet and her Blastoise lent him an arm to stand, while Espeon and Golduck stood in front of him protectively.

"Definitely been better," he rasped, wiping the blood from his face with the sleeve of his armor.

"Well, feel better," Daisy said from his other side. "You just saved a whole lot of people."

Gary looked up, and sure enough the Cerulean and Pewter forces seemed to have bypassed the gate unscathed thanks to his actions. They hooted and hollered in raucous relief at the miracle that had ensured their lives, and charged forward with renewed vigor. Jagged slabs of rock as big as houses jutted out from the ground where the Rocket trainers had once stood.

"I did that?" he said, incredulous. "I saved them?"

"Yeah," Violet said. "Damn, I gotta say I had my doubts, but maybe you three really can make a difference."

A young man clutching a bum left arm jogged toward Gary. "You! The Delphi!"

Daisy and her Dewgong stepped forward to greet the newcomer designated as an enemy by his Saffron crest, and he slowed to a halt a safe distance away with his arms up.

"Please, I mean no harm. Those women, the Syreni and the Messor, they said to find you. To ask you about freeing Master Itosu Anko. She said you could free him if we Dojo trainers agreed to fight with you!"

"Misty," Daisy said. "You talked to my sister?"

"I'm Yusuke Iwaishi. I've spread the word to the other Bellators, and they've pulled back their Pokémon, as you can see. We'll help you if you can guarantee our master's safety."

Gary wiped the rest of the blood from his chin. "And if I can't guarantee your master's safety? What then?"

Yusuke pressed his lips together. "He's our priority. But...either way, we hold no loyalty to Sabrina. Please, we're no match for her Psychics. You're like them, you can fight them. If you help us, we'll gladly stand with you in this fight."

Gary reached for Espeon and laid a hand on its back. Immediately, the world rushed past him like he was moving at the speed of light. Espeon took him all over the city, to a dark alley where a homeless man huddled in the shadows and prayed to his gods to keep him safe, to a house where a family of five sat in solemn silence eating dinner trying to ignore the end of the world happening all around them, and finally to the Dojo, deep underground. When he looked up at Yusuke again, Gary held the man's gaze.

"Your master's being held under the Dojo by a team of skilled Psychic trainers, but none of them are Clairvoyant. We may be able to get him out alive if we do it carefully." He turned to Daisy. "Can I ask you and the Cerulean Gym trainers for your help? I could use some hard-hitting water attacks to knock them out without killing the master."

"Sounds good to me," Violet said for her sister. "Hang tight, kid. I'll get

Misty."

"Oh, thank you," Yusuke said. "I'll come with you. I know the Dojo and its secret passages. If Master Anko is underground, I know how to get to him quietly."

Gary nodded and stood on his own so Violet could relay the message to Misty. Farther ahead stood the towering Wall Pythia, the last line of defense between Sabrina and him. Ivy had already flown to the other side along with Ash, leaving Gary to deal with the Dojo. But he had every intention of joining her as soon as he was able, and there was no time to waste. Once more tapping into Espeon's telepathy, he rallied his Pokémon.

Full speed ahead to the Dojo.

Arcanine and Scizor took off, eager for more action, and Gary released Nidoking to guard his back. The armored rodent roared something fierce, and alongside Golduck and Espeon, Gary slowly made his way deeper into Dodona District. Every step sent a splitting pain through his skull, but he pressed two fingers against his temple and concentrated on the surface pressure to help blot out the deep-seated ache.

A pair of Rocket Grunts each with an Electabuzz and a Magmar that were giving the Celadon warrior trainers a hard time loomed up ahead in front of a public library. Their trainers were skilled and had experience tag-teaming their enemies. Electabuzz and Magmar coordinated their power attacks one after the other, taking advantage of the opponent's blind spots. A Celadon trainer with a Parasect was leading the charge against them, but Magmar's Fire Punch deterred the crustacean and fried any attempt to subdue it with Spore.

Toxic Spikes, Gary communicated silently to Nidoking.

Nidoking charged forward and shook out its poisoned quills. Bits of sharp bone drenched in venom rained down at Electabuzz and Magmar's feet, staying their onslaught.

Psybeam.

Unbeknownst to the Rocket Grunts, Espeon leaped high into the air and blasted a thick beam of silvery light at the wavering Electabuzz and Magmar, putting them even more at risk. The Celadon warrior's Parasect, seeing an opening, moved in with precision speed and shot a renewed batch of Spore particles.

Gary searched for an opening to have Golduck blow the Rocket Grunts away with Hydro Pump, but something sparkled unnaturally in the corner of his eye. He turned to look, but the hyper-concentrated blast of Psychic energy moved too fast. He sucked in a breath, no time even to be afraid, and fell backwards on the ground, hands flying up to guard his face.

Someone screamed somewhere nearby, protracted in the stretch of the next agonizing few seconds. One moment he was getting ready to greet certain death, and the next a blur of blue raced in front of him and blocked the attempt on his life entirely. Golduck had jumped in front of the attack and taken it head-on. The swift swimmer convulsed in mid-air, suspended until its head bent back at an abnormal angle, and vacuous, black eyes stared back at Gary. The Psychic energy ripped into Golduck's moist flesh and tore it apart with invisible claws, limb from limb, quartering it right before Gary's eyes.

He didn't even realize it had happened until Golduck's blood splattered across his face and chest, soaking him completely in red. Entrails and severed limbs fell to the ground in a pulpy heap at his feet, unrecognizable.

For the next seventeen seconds exactly, the battle, the very world fell silent as he stared at the remains. He heard nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing but Golduck's still-warm blood running down his face in sheets. His breathing came in short, shallow gasps as his eyes tried to process what his heart already knew.

But he couldn't.

The shaking in his hands got worse as sound, sight, and smell returned to him, and he raised his fingers to his damp face, drawing tracks along his cheeks and forehead.

No.

The migraine he'd gotten earlier bloomed into a monster on a rampage, and he sank into the pain, made it his home and let it rule him mind, body, and soul. It took hold of him and hauled him to his feet, where he reached for his last Great Ball in a dark daze. Every face around him burned in his mind's eye, and he couldn't stand their skin-crawling stares, their silent heart whispers like curses in his ears as he rose from his bloody baptism. Tears welled in his eyes and mixed with Golduck's blood on his face. The world turned red before him.

"No!"

A piercing squawk rattled the very air as Aerodactyl emerged from the Great Ball in a flurry of white light. Gary said nothing as he quietly recalled Arcanine, Scizor, and Nidoking in the midst of their fights to climb atop Aerodactyl. Espeon jumped on after him and settled at his lap, head ducked down. Tears blurred Gary's vision and blotted out Golduck's remains still leaking blood on the pavement below, but they did nothing for the looping vision of his oldest Pokémon getting ripped apart from the inside out right before his eyes. He clutched the pommel of Aerodactyl's leather saddle with a white-knuckled grip to stop the shaking.

"Gary! Hey, where're you going? We have to get to the Dojo!" Daisy said.

Misty was with her, and she noticed Golduck's entrails splayed on the ground at Aerodactyl's feet. "Gary, wait, please. You can't just—"

"Watch me," he bit out.

He kicked Aerodactyl's sides and bade the ancient Pokémon fly. In three beats of its massive, purple wings, they were airborne and soaring over Dodona District. Psychic trainers and Rocket Grunts scattered along the streets as they attempted to stealth-attack the invaders, anything to get a leg up. Gary bared his teeth at them and let hatred and anger guide his hand.

"Hyper Beam!"

Aerodactyl screeched and let loose a jagged, orange shaft of light that drew a deep crag in the earth below and chased after fleeing Saffron trainers and soldiers without remorse. Their screams and cries of terror echoed in Gary's pain-split head like chimes signaling the dawn winds. He leaned forward over Espeon.

"Again," he commanded.

Aerodactyl let loose again, and the city burned beneath him.

With Charizard back in its Ultra Ball, the penthouse office looked a lot bigger and a lot more destroyed thanks to the winged lizard's crash landing. Ash explored with Gengar and Pikachu, looking under couches and examining bookshelves, but there seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary.

"I guess it's just a regular old office."

Something caught Gengar's attention near the back wall, and the Ghost looked back at him with a dramatic frown.

"What is it? You find something?"

Pikachu went to investigate and pawed at the wall. Ash pressed his ear to the wall, and beyond it he could make out muffled movement, like something was rolling around. Eyes wide, he stepped back and took in the whole wall, searching for some clue as to how to get past it.

Luckily, he had a Ghost that could pass through material objects.

"Gengar, go and see what's back there."

The Ghost perked up and grinned before passing through the solid wall to the other side. It wasn't long before something heavy crashed against the wall, and Ash winced. Gengar re-emerged looking especially pleased with itself. It pointed emphatically at the wall and sent a tremor of giddy anticipation down Ash's spine.

"You found something? Nothing bad, I hope?"

The Ghost floated up to Ash's eye level and cackled, clapping its taloned hands together.

"Well, I can't pass through walls, so I gotta find another way through."

He felt around the wall for a lever or switch, and after a couple minutes of searching came across—of all things—a book in the bookshelf that doubled as a secret switch. He narrowed his eyes in a withering look, like the book was at fault.

"...Jinkies."

The wall slid open on a hidden conveyor and opened up in a small alcove. A panic room, if he had to guess, judging from the boxes of labeled medical supplies and freeze-dried food. A man lay on the ground, bound and gagged and wide-eyed as he looked between Ash and his ghostly companion. Gengar laughed, and the man tried to squirm farther back into the room.

"Whoa, hey, it's cool! I'm here to help," Ash said, kneeling down. "I mean, unless you're Team Rocket. Then I might have to toss you out

the window."

The man made a muffled screaming sound from behind his gag, and Ash bit back a laugh. "Sorry. Hanging around Ghosts all day gives me a morbid sense of humor. Here, lemme get these off you."

The man calmed down enough to let Ash untie his restraints and remove the gag around his mouth. He sucked in a deep breath once free of the constraint and heaved. The poor man was stripped down to his underwear and sock garters, and his snow white hair was a disheveled mess. Unshaven stubble prickled his wrinkly chin and cheeks, and there were bags under his brown eyes. He'd been in here for a while, perhaps released only to relieve himself now and then judging from the concentration of body odor in the cramped room.

"Hey, you okay? You look like you've been through a lot," Ash said.

"I am now, thanks to you." He rubbed his mouth to get the tingle from the gag out. "Thank you for helping me. I take if from your introduction and manner of entry," he nodded to the shattered windows and desk, "that you're not with Team Rocket."

"Nah, I'm kinda the hero sent to stop 'em."

The old man didn't get the joke and set his jaw. "Good. If you can manage to take care of Archer and his scientists, then Silph will be greatly indebted to you, Mr...?"

"Ash Ketchum. And sorry, but I thought Silph *was* Team Rocket. That's why I flew in here the way I did."

The man shook his head. "Preposterous. It's a long story, but Team Rocket used to be a lucrative business partner until they made clear their intentions of pursuing more...illicit projects. I wanted no part of it, and as a result I was summarily removed and replaced with one of their own."

Ash frowned. "Wait a sec. Who *are* you?"

The man smoothed back his unkempt hair and assumed as much dignity as he could muster sitting on the floor in his underwear. "Why, I'm Philip Gordon, the rightful President and CEO of Silph."

"Huh, never heard of you."

"Oh...really? I'm quite well known."

"Nope, not ringin' a bell."

"I see..."

Ash lent him a hand to stand. "But I did see your name on the plaque at the desk. Plus, I doubt the Rocket Admin here would wanna hole up in a panic room in his underwear while there's a war goin' on outside."

Gordon accepted the hand and stood up. "War? What on earth are you talking about?"

Ash's expression darkened. "The war on Saffron. Celadon, Cerulean, Pewter, Vermilion, and even Lavender're teaming up to take out Sabrina and Team Rocket."

Gengar hovered over Ash's head and closed in on Gordon's face with a grin, and the old man nearly fell over again.

"G-Get that thing away from me!"

"Cut that out," Ash scolded the Ghost. "You could give him a heart attack, seriously."

Gengar's expression fell, and it floated to the ground in a mope. Pikachu sniffed at it, but wrinkled its nose in disgust at the faint smell of rot that was the Ghost's natural scent.

"Sorry, Gengar's just messing around. Ghosts are tricksters, but he doesn't mean any harm. Well, I mean, unless I tell him to." He put up his hands. "But I won't! Really, you don't have to worry, I really do just wanna help you."

"You can help me by letting me get out of this godforsaken closet."

"Uh, right, of course." Ash backed out of the panic room and let Gordon pass.

The lashing winds outside brought a chilling draft into the office, and he shivered. He immediately went to one of the closets and grabbed the first article of clothing he could find—a heavy trench coat. Decent and a little warmer, he went to stand by Ash behind one of the intact windows to avoid the worst of the wind chill.

"Good god..." Gordon looked outside toward Wall Pythia, where plumes of black smoke rose on the other side. Below, trainers, soldiers, and more Rocket Agents were heading for the gate to help

their allies in Dodona District.

"Before I got in here, we'd just breached Wall Dodona. I figure it won't be long before Pythia falls, too," Ash said. "But before that happens, I gotta take out the Rockets in charge here and secure the building."

Gordon swallowed and steeled his expression. "Then we don't have much time. I can't do anything like this, and I'm no Pokémon trainer. But if you can take back this tower from Team Rocket, I'll see to it that you're rewarded appropriately."

"Actually, I was wondering if you knew where I might find the Admin here. I figured he'd be here, but obviously he's not."

"Ah, I would assume Archer's in the R&D lab on the thirty-seventh floor. I've been hearing bits and pieces about a big project he's heading up, and he's using Silph resources to do it. Whatever it is, he's spent a good deal of time and money seeing it through to fruition. I suggest you begin there."

"Okay, cool. Elevator's this way?"

Gordon followed him to the elevator, but when Ash pushed the button, nothing happened.

"Archer must have activated the emergency alarm. The elevators will be shut down until the backup generator kicks in."

"Hm. Okay, Pikachu, see if you can override the door."

Pikachu sparked, and Gordon backed away in fright just as Pikachu scintillated with a concentrated Thundershock that enveloped the doors in yellow light. The call button began to smoke and popped, and the arrival chime dinged faster and faster until it, too, short circuited. Pikachu's attack died down, and Ash reached for the elevator doors experimentally. With a heave, he managed to pry them open and pushed them the rest of the way with his legs and back.

"Young man, need I remind you that the elevator will not arrive to take you to the thirty-seventh floor? How will you get down there?"

Ash reached for Gengar, and the Ghost happily merged with him. Pale, indigo fire danced along Ash's frame and plunged his eyes into shadows. Gordon paled and steadied himself on the wall.

"Don't worry about me, Mr. President. I've done this kinda thing

before. You just hang out here til all this is over, okay?"

Pikachu jumped up into Ash's arms, and with a salute to Gordon, he jumped into the empty elevator shaft. Gengar's spectral cloak slowed his descent to a comfortable float, and Ash fell feet-first as he counted the floors.

"Thirty-nine...thirty-eight... Here we go. Thirty-seven."

He floated to the small, metal ledge in front of the elevator doors and let Pikachu crawl to his shoulders so he could pry them open. A sudden scraping sound like metal on metal stayed his hand, and he turned to see the thick elevator cords moving.

"Huh? I thought Gordon said the elevator wasn't wor—"

With an icy shudder of fear, Gengar forcibly yanked Ash up away from the doors just as a bright light flashed through the crack and blew them clean out. Ash clutched his chest and heaved, while Pikachu squeaked in his ear. But he heard nothing, and his eyes burned with the searing light. If not for Gengar's shadowy aegis, he was sure he'd be in worse shape than the now twisted, deformed metal doors that were blown open.

"What...the fuck...was *that*?" he said between gasping breaths.

The elevator cords were still pulling, and the elevator was slowly ascending from the bottom floors. With no choice but to escape onto the thirty-seventh floor or risk getting crushed by the approaching elevator, Ash floated down and emerged on the lab floor. He gingerly stepped forward, cautious after such a devastating attack had nearly killed him through six inches of pure iron. The foyer, or what was left of it, was charred and ripped apart like a wrecking ball had been through here.

"Oh, shit."

He shielded his face to the bodies on the floor, Rocket Grunts and a few Scientists. At least, they had once been. Now, they lay in parts and pieces among congealed blood. One was facing up, and Ash leaned over him to get a better look.

"What the..."

His mouth was stretched open in a scream, and thick blood slowly spilled from the corners of his mouth, nose, and eyes like molasses.

Ash had never seen blood so thick before. There were cracks in the Grunt's skin, like he'd been left to dry out in the sun until his skin became too brittle to stretch any further. From within the small crags, a silvery ooze seeped out.

Ash was so lost in the holocaust he'd stumbled into that he barely heard the elevator ding behind him until Pikachu bit his ear.

"Ow! Pikachu, what the hell?"

Like a deer in the headlights, he came face to face with two people he'd sworn to kill should they ever cross paths again.

"Oh dear, Jessie, looks like we were a bit late."

Jessie and James, the Rocket Agents that had ambushed him in Mt. Moon a year ago, stood in the elevator drawn as taut as crossbows. Ash remained perfectly still as they stared each other down and the tension in the blown out room began to boil.

Gengar rose from Ash's shoulders and grinned down at the Rocket Agents, and it was enough to break the moment. Ash turned on his heel and ran through the decimated security door just as Jessie released Arbok.

"Kill him!" she screeched.

The big snake slithered after Ash and snapped at his heels as he jumped over bodies like hurdles on a racing track, chasing him deeper into the slaughterhouse.

The flash of light blinded Ivy to the ground not sixty feet below, and she squeezed her eyes shut, resolved that if she was going to die, she wouldn't watch it happen. Something warm and soft slammed into her chest and knocked the wind out of her. Impact with the ground came as a delayed reaction, and she sank, suspended under the pressure of gravity and the force of the fall, suffocating. Squirming, she tried to scream but got a mouthful of fur. Just when she was sure she would asphyxiate, her body bounced back the way it had come.

Wind beating her down with invisible hands, Ivy struggled to sit up only to fall again. Something shuddered under her, but she fisted her hands in the soft fur and held on tight. After two more bounces, she barely rose off the ground and slipped off the side of her savior, landing on all fours and sucking in deep, gulping breaths.

"Still alive."

Wigglytuff rolled around beside Ivy, but Wall Pythia stopped it from wandering too far. Ivy stood up slowly and patted the super-inflated rabbit on its tummy.

"Hey."

Wigglytuff, now firmly on the ground, quickly deflated and returned to normal size in a matter of seconds. It took a moment to shake out its fur and shed a cloud of dust, and when it finished it rose up on its hinds legs and blinked up at Ivy.

Ivy scooped up the shockingly pink Pokémon and hugged it tight. "Oh, Wigglytuff, you're seriously the *best*. I'm *so* glad Gary and I interrupted that creepy evolutionary ritual back on Mt. Moon so you could get caught up in our crazy lives and keep me from falling to my death all the time."

Wigglytuff squirmed in her grip and crawled onto her shoulder where it could get a better view of its surroundings.

"Ah, too much?"

Ivy bit back a silly grin and scratched the pink rabbit behind the ear before setting it back down on the ground. By sheer luck, she'd managed to land behind a warehouse of some kind right next to the wall. Footsteps echoed in the distance, people running to the gate in the opposite direction, and Ivy immediately pressed herself against the wall. Wigglytuff remained close, unwilling to wander off too far in this turbulent environment where the smell of blood was rife in the air. Ivy peered around the corner to the street. It was a side street, one not well traveled from the looks of it, but the gate to Wall Pythia lay directly west about a hundred yards. People in black uniforms as well as expensive armor bearing the orange Saffron Gym crest gathered there and released a horde of Pokémon to aid them, including a tall Machamp with a crimson flower attached to its chest. Ivy withdrew and recalled Wigglytuff, hands shaking.

Was wondering when Chimera would rear its ugly head here.

But she had a job to do, so someone else would have to deal with the abomination that passed through the gate. Taking a deep breath, Ivy silently crept to the other side of the warehouse and peered around it.

Someone had obviously seen her breach Wall Pythia, but judging from

the enormity of the Psychic attack that leveled Crobat in just one hit, her money was on Sabrina herself having intervened.

"At least the queen bitch welcomed me herself. I'm *flattered*."

The road was clear, so she quickly made her way across it to a large, public garden that took up an entire city block. Silph Tower loomed directly overhead, and Ash should be arriving any time to infiltrate. Returning her focus to the task at hand, Ivy made her way around the wide lake in the center of the garden and came out on the other side. The Gym loomed a couple blocks away in a brick building just two stories tall, nothing impressive. Ivy darted through narrow alleys and kept to the shadows on her way to the Gym. A pair of Rocket Grunts jogged by at the mouth of the alley facing the Gym, and she sucked in a breath and pressed herself as hard as she could against the wall. They jogged by in a haste, too caught up in whatever they were doing to take notice. Once the coast was clear, she crept out of the alley and crossed the cobblestone street to the Gym.

Bypassing the front door entirely, she skirted around back and kept her head down. When she spotted what she was looking for, she chuckled to herself. Even the great Sabrina had to follow fire code regulations. A fire escape ladder hung just overhead and led to an open window on the second floor. With the severe beating her left arm had taken from the Hitmonlee earlier, Ivy was down to her dominant hand alone. Not ideal, but not the end of the world. Gauging the distance to the end of the ladder, she backed up and got a running start at the brick wall. Leaping with all her might, she pushed off the wall and shot upwards. Her right hand just barely grasped the last rung of the ladder, which shed a cloud of rust under her weight. Grimacing as she held in a sneeze, she hauled herself up through the pain in her shoulder, careful to rely mostly on her right arm.

Once clear, she crouched down on the metal grate and looked around, listening for any sign of eavesdropping. When she detected none, she slipped through the window and dropped down inside the Gym with hardly a sound. Aside from the sunlight that filtered in through the window, overhead lamps lit a path down the corridor to the left and right.

The walls were whitewashed and seemed to go on forever, obliviating in their monotony, reminiscent of a hospital. It even smelled funky, like someone had taken great care in scrubbing the walls clean so no one would see what had once covered them. Ivy pushed the thought out of her mind and headed to the right. Erika was many things, but

unprepared was not one of them. She'd provided the trio not only with maps of Saffron itself, but also of the Gym's blueprints. They were several years old from when Sabrina first took power, but buildings didn't change too much.

Ivy followed the path, pausing at the few doors she came across and listening carefully for signs of life. There were none. When she reached the end of the hall, she came upon the door she'd been looking for, marked 'Boiler Room'. But as she approached and rounded the corner to the left, muffled voices drifted to her and she once again pressed herself against the wall to listen. They were coming from just ahead, where there was a break in the wall that was gated off with a metal railing. Careful to remain out of sight, she peered around the edge and spotted seven people standing around in an open arena on the first floor below.

Like many of the other Gyms she had visited in Kanto, this one looked like it was carved directly out of the ground. The floor was stone and dirt, and several large, perfectly spherical boulders sat at random locations around the Gym. But other than that, the arena was barren and devoid of any memorable markers. The people in the arena wore Team Rocket uniforms, and they had a few Pokémon out. Ivy counted a Sandslash, a Politoed, and a Wobbuffet among them. More than likely, the Grunts had more Pokémon stashed away in Pokéballs, but it was their mistake for not calling them out now. Ivy bit her cheek to hide her disgust as she turned back to the boiler room Erika had indicated on the blueprints.

It was locked, predictably, but that didn't stop her. She pulled a bobby pin from the bun in her hair and unbent it to pick the lock. It was an old trick she'd performed a thousand times before, and this particular lock was nothing special. She was inside in a matter of seconds and quietly closed the door behind her without a sound.

The dimly lit room held large water heaters and stacked boxes for storage purposes, but Ivy bypassed all these to get to the fuse box embedded in the back wall. She opened it up and examined the blinking lights, smirking.

"Perfect."

Reaching for a Pokéball at her belt, she released Houndoom. The black hellhound came up to her shoulder at the tallest point of its curved horns, and the bones that had begun creeping past its thick fur as a Houndour now protruded prominently, as though its ribs were

too thick to keep in. They leaked tendrils of dark energy from the imperfections in the bone. Houndoom growled low and whipped its forked tail. Ivy held a finger to her lips to silence it.

"Melt this."

Houndoom bared its fangs and breathed a concentrated stream of blue fire at the the fuse box. The metal frame and plastic melted before her eyes and sparked. The lights overhead flickered a couple times before going out, plunging the cramped room into thick darkness. But for Ivy, the room had never looked clearer. She bit her lip to repress a giggle and patted Houndoom's head.

"Good boy."

Houndoom panted happily and trotted after her. Despite its long nails, it moved in almost complete silence, a stalker in the darkness much like its trainer. When they exited the boiler room, the entire Gym had gone dark and the Rocket trainers in the arena were nervously talking about what could have happened. One of them decided to check out the fuse box and headed for the stairs that led to the balcony Ivy had used to spy on them previously. She signaled to Houndoom and pressed herself against the wall around the corner. Houndoom growled low in the back of its throat, and she laid a hand on its head to calm its temper.

The Rocket Grunt, a girl about her size, headed for the boiler room's door and fished around for her keys.

"Hurry up, Daphne!" one of the men called.

"Yeah, yeah, gimme a sec!"

The girl grumbled under her breath as she jingled a few keys, oblivious.

Ivy moved in like a ghost in the night, soundless and unrepentant. Before the girl could so much as gasp in surprise, Ivy squeezed a hand over her mouth and snapped her neck. She caught Daphne using her upper body as a support and slowly lowered the girl's corpse to the floor, where it rested against the door to the boiler room.

Houndoom salivated just a couple feet away in the shadows, and Ivy shot the canine a look. "Patience," she said, barely audible.

Ducking around the corner again to avoid detection, Ivy released

Umbreon. The black feline's auriferous eyes glowed with uncanny inner light in the gloom, but to a non-Reaper Umbreon would blend into the inky darkness perfectly. The Rocket Agents in the arena continued to talk amongst themselves, oblivious to the wraith stalking them from the shadows.

Ivy crept to the stairs and descended. Houndoom and Umbreon followed closed behind, so quiet she was almost tempted to look back and make sure they were following. In her enchanted eyes, the remaining six Rocket Agents were easily discernible as they stood around, slumped and lax.

She crouched down and ran a hand through Umbreon's thick, dark fur. With a nod, she indicated the ungainly Wobbuffet that teetered precariously on its too-small feet. Umbreon took off and circled the odd Psychic Pokémon. As for the Sandslash and Politoed, the former would make more of a ruckus should it become alerted to an enemy, so Ivy directed Houndoom toward it. The bloodthirsty canine crouched on its haunches and prepared to lunge at the opportune moment.

Ivy herself gave the Rocket Agents a wide berth as she picked out which she would want to take out first.

Whoever would scream the loudest.

That happened to be a skinny young man who stood hunched over and shaking as his eyes shifted around him.

"Guys, Daphne's been gone a while," he whined. "Shouldn't we check on her?"

"Quite being such a pussy," one of the other male Grunts said. "What, afraid of a little dark? Hah!"

Ivy ignored them and stealthily approached the skinny Grunt. A part of her almost felt bad. The poor guy was afraid of the dark, after all, and somehow he'd gotten mixed up with Team Rocket. But the thought of Ash and Gary fighting with their lives on the line, of Marco so far away but still a beacon of hope in her heart as they tried to do the impossible together, banished the thought. This guy had chosen the wrong side.

The other Grunts went on with their conversation and ignored the skinny guy, so Ivy closed in fast and hard. She pulled a knife from a holster at her thigh, snuck up behind him, and slid it across his throat

in one fluid motion. His warm blood spurted against her fingers as she lowered him to the ground and quickly left him behind. The other Grunts hadn't even noticed.

Houndoom barely restrained its snarl as it pounced on Sandslash and buried the spiky shrew under sharp teeth and a hundred pounds of raw instinct. Sandslash scratched feebly at the ground, but Houndoom bit down on its neck and crushed it.

"Hey, did you hear something?" one of the Grunts said.

"Yeah, Pietro totally farted!"

"Did *not*!"

Ivy snuck up on another one of the Grunts who'd joined in the round of laughter and covered his mouth with her hand before stabbing her knife into the juncture between his neck and shoulder. He convulsed in her arms, heavy, and she repressed a hiss as she lowered him to the ground.

"Oi, Daphne! How's the fuse box coming?"

When there was no answer, the remaining four Grunts shuffled about. Umbreon took the opportunity to tackle Wobbuffet to the ground and sink its teeth into the rubbery Pokémon's face. It gurgled softly but fell still in a matter of seconds.

"Okay, I *know* I heard something," a woman said. "I... I think there's someone here."

"Hah! No way. Duncan woulda already started whining about it."

There was a pause as the Grunts looked around.

"Duncan?"

No answer. Ivy looked back at the skinny Grunt she'd picked off first and guessed him to be Duncan the Whiner. She stalked toward the big guy who'd made fun of him while Houndoom circled the group.

"Did you hear that?" the woman said. "I heard a growl just now!"

"Daphne, this isn't funny!" the big guy said. "Come on, you can turn the lights back on now."

Ivy crept up behind him, bloody knife in hand, and lunged. She

clambered onto his broad back, and he jerked in surprise to try to knock her off. He cried out just as she plunged her knife into his throat and yanked, drawing an ugly gash down to his collarbone that spewed hot blood and added to the coat already staining her hand.

"Shit!"

Ivy withdrew her knife and let the big guy hit the ground with a loud thud. "Crunch!"

Houndoom leaped, jaws gnashing, at another Grunt who was blind in the dark and too slow to see the beast coming. He screamed just at Houndoom ripped out his throat and began to feast on his flesh.

Only the woman and another man remained, and they attempted to run to the Gym's doors. The Politoed croaked and hopped after its trainer.

"Umbreon!" Ivy shouted.

The sleek feline Headbutted Politoed and knocked it hard into the wall, where it hit its head and sank to the ground, unconscious. Ivy threw her knife and hit the fleeing man between his shoulder blades, and he went down with a sputter. He skidded head-first over the rocky ground, flaying the skin off his cheek.

"Oh god!" the woman shrieked.

She fumbled at her belt for a Pokéball, but Ivy sprinted at her and tackled her. They both went down and grappled for dominance. The woman shoved her bum shoulder, and Ivy hissed in pain. It was enough for the woman to throw her off and make another break for the door. But Houndoom was there with Flamethrower and blocked her path. Ivy pulled herself up and lunged. Just as the woman spun to avoid the fire attack, Ivy slugged her in the face and sent her crumpling to the ground. Houndoom snarled over her and dripped drool on the woman's face. She wasn't going anywhere. Ivy kneeled down over her and slugged her again out of spite. Tears streaked down the woman's cheeks, and she moaned.

"Please, I don't want to die—"

Before she could finish her sentence, Ivy stabbed one of her many hidden knives into the woman's stomach to the hilt. The woman heaved a sob and clutched her hands around the blade's hilt.

"P-Please..."

"Listen to me very carefully," Ivy said softly. "What's your name?"

The woman sucked in a shaky breath muddled with pain. "Mari... Marisol."

"Marisol," Ivy repeated. "Are there other trainers here besides your group?"

Marisol hiccuped and shuddered. "W-Why should I tell you?"

Ivy twisted the knife, and the Grunt howled in pain. Tears streamed down her dirty face, and her eyes dilated.

"'Cause if you tell me what I wanna know, I'll let you walk outta here. I stabbed you in the stomach. That means you got about ten or fifteen minutes tops to live until your stomach acid poisons you from the inside out, judging from how deep I made the cut. I'm willing to let you go get medical help if you cooperate."

Marisol gurgled in a half cough, half hiccup.

"So, my question. How many?"

She shook her head. "None. J-Just us."

It was still pitch black in the Gym. Marisol probably couldn't see her well despite how clear the Grunt's face was in Ivy's eyes.

Good.

"What about Sabrina?"

"She... She's..."

"What?"

Marisol sucked in a rattling breath and trembled. "Oh god, please let me go!"

Ivy leaned in close and bared her teeth. "*Not* until you tell me what I wanna know."

"I-I don't know! She never l-leaves the Gym!"

"But she's not here."

"I haven't seen Sabrina, I *swear*." She paused, frantic at this point. "I-I do know something else. Will you let me go if I t-tell you?"

"That depends on what it is. I don't care about local politics."

"No, no! This is impor-important." Marisol hiccuped and winced in pain. "You, you're fighting Team Rocket, right? Th-Then you should go to Fuchsia City."

"Fuchsia?"

"We control the Gym. K-Koga, he's one of our Admins. I've seen him here, t-talking with Sabrina. F-Fuchsia belongs to Team Rocket!"

Ivy's mind reeled at the revelation. Another major city under Team Rocket's control. It was more than she'd ever imagined.

"Please! Have m-mercy, I beg you! I've told you everything I kn-know."

"Mercy, huh?"

Ivy scanned Marisol's blue eyes for something that wasn't there. After a moment's deliberation, she pushed off the Grunt and withdrew the knife. Marisol squealed like a stuck pig and clutched her bleeding stomach. She struggled to stand and escape before Ivy could change her mind. When she finally managed to get the door open and tumble outside, Ivy looked away.

"I dunno the meaning of the word."

She didn't go after Marisol. The woman would collapse before she could make it to a hospital or even a Pokémon Center. This death was a painful one, but effective for enticing cooperation under the pretense that just maybe, time wasn't working against the victim and she had a chance to make it out alive. Will had taught her that. He'd always liked to watch his victims hope and struggle, like a game.

"*I'm just so* bored *all the time."*

She wiped her hand on her pants and pushed the memory to a dark corner of her mind. Houndoom and Umbreon approached her, perfectly at ease in the total darkness. Ivy looked around at the bodies she'd added to her ledger. What did it even matter at this point?

"Find the Clairvoyant," she ordered her Pokémon.

Houndoom and Umbreon took off and explored the arena, sniffing and

pawing at the ground, the walls, even the dead bodies of the Rocket Grunts Ivy had murdered. They never saw her face, not even Marisol.

Houndoom barked, and Ivy stood up to go to it. Umbreon stood with it, and they hovered over a spot in the dirt, totally unassuming and lacking in any sort of marker to designate it as important.

"Here?"

Houndoom whined and Umbreon merely stared up at her with its sinister, yellow gaze.

"Okay, then."

Ivy bent down and began sweeping away the dirt and dust. It caked under her fingernails where Duncan's blood had congealed. Sure enough, after a minute or two of searching, a trap door's outline protruded among the sands. Ivy traced the edges with her fingers and found the hatch, which she yanked up. The trap door flung open and revealed a wide, metal staircase that descended deeper into darkness. There was nothing in Erika's blueprints to indicate a basement level.

"So this is where you're hiding," Ivy mused aloud. "In the heart of darkness."

Her lips curled into a smirk as she took her time descending the steps. Umbreon and Houndoom trotted along behind her, ever silent as they followed Ivy into the abyss.

Ready or not, here I come.

From where Violet was standing, things had gone from worse to beyond dismal. Gary soared overhead on Aerodactyl, Hyper Beaming anything that moved and leaving nothing but ashes in his wake.

"Goddamnit," she swore under her breath.

"Violet, we have to get to the Dojo," Daisy said. "With or without Gary."

"He's gonna get somebody killed if he keeps this shit up, maybe even himself!"

"We can't worry about that! We need the Fighters to help us, so this is all we can do." She followed Gary's flight with her gaze as he had

Aerodactyl level an entire stadium where Rocket Grunts had taken up residence to attack with a couple of Ninetales from a distance. "At least he's dealing with this by fighting instead of freezing up."

Resigned, Violet signaled her Blastoise and took off with Daisy and her two Dewgong toward the Dojo. Misty was waiting by the entrance with Yusuke, where she had Vaporeon tear into a Mr. Mime with Fury Swipes. The bipedal Pokémon let out a shriek and fell to its knees, where it began to glow with silvery light in preparation for a counter attack.

"Hydro Pump!"

Vaporeon breathed a stream of high-pressure water that slammed into the Mr. Mime before it could unleash its attack and flung it against the wall of the Dojo. It slid down to the ground and groaned, barely moving.

"There you two are," Misty said. "C'mon, we have to hurry."

"It's just downstairs past the moat," Yusuke said.

He tossed out his last Pokéball, and a short but plucky Marowak emerged, twirling two femur bones far too large to belong to its own species.

"Moat?" Misty said. "Underground?"

"Master Anko says we have to have a balance with nature in order to know how to outsmart it. He is a splendid Bellator, but he prefers to fight with many types of Pokémon."

Violet frowned. "Sounds like a load of stuffing to me, but that moat'll come in handy for us, at least."

"Let's go," Misty said.

The sisters followed Yusuke inside the Dojo, which was a wide arena that took up half a city block. Worn, hardwood floors recently polished stretched from wall to wall, and Violet eyed her own reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors on all sides. Punching bags, suspended rings, and all manner of weights ranging from five to five thousand pounds were neatly organized along the back wall in racks. A banner lay in tatters along the western wall under a picture of an old man sitting cross-legged in traditional yukata. The frame was badly cracked.

"When the Psychics came, they defaced our Dojo," Yusuke whispered. "I can live with their defilement of our training grounds, but I can't forgive their treatment of Master Anko."

"Cool it, kid," Violet snapped. "We'll get him out and you can clean this place up spick and span."

Yusuke nodded. "This way." He pressed his palm against one of the mirrors in the wall and revealed a revolving door that led to a narrow, stone staircase. "The true Dojo is underground. Please watch your step."

Yusuke and his Marowak led the shallow descent with Misty and Vaporeon bringing up the rear. Violet and Daisy recalled their Pokémon, who were too bulky to fit in the narrow corridor. They traveled in silence, and after just a couple minutes of walking, they emptied out into a wide room. Water frothed ahead in a natural, subterranean river about fifteen yards across that cut into the stone and soil.

"Who're you?"

Five men all dressed in loose-fitting robes looked up from their conversation and spread out to face the intruders.

"Aw, boys, we're just here to have a little fun," Violet said. "Don't you wanna have some *fun*?"

The men threw out several Pokéballs and revealed a slew of Psychic Pokémon, including Kadabra, Mr. Mime, two Girafarig, and a Hypno to lead the group.

"You're here to free the master, aren't you?" one of the Psychic trainers said.

"What, you have to ask? I thought you guys were s'posed to be mind readers," Daisy said.

"Enough talking." Misty selected a single Pokéball from her belt. "If you guys don't move, I'll make you."

"Psybeam!" the five trainers yelled in unison.

Misty threw her Pokéball just as Violet tackled her to the ground. The silvery shafts of Psychic light cut into the ground where they had been standing just a second ago and warped the stone. It rose up like

whipped cream, deformed under the telekinetic energy.

The Pokéball Misty had thrown released her Gyarados, and it rose up out of the water and glared down at the Psychics.

"Hydro Pump!"

A blast of water as powerful as any Hyper Beam sprayed the Psychic trainers where they stood, forcing them to scatter. The Kadabra was too slow to avoid the hit and disappeared within the pressurized column of water. Violet and Daisy released Blastoise and Dewgong.

"Can't believe I'm defending Bellators, of all things," Violet grumbled.

"Well, believe it!" Daisy said. "Ice Beam!"

Her two Dewgong breathed bolts of ice that shimmered like diamond dust as they zigzagged toward the Psychics.

Surge wiped the sweat from his brow and pressed on toward Wall Pythia's gate with Sandra and several other Vermilion Gym trainers he'd hand-picked for this mission. They were all ex military and skilled trainers that specialized in Electric-types, though he was the only Fulmen of their ranks. Erika and her female fighters were engaged ahead, and never one to be left out of some quality action, Surge pointed in her direction.

"Thunder Punch," he commanded.

Electabuzz roared and leaped forward, sparking as it charged one of its taloned paws to take on a Machamp from behind. But the Fighter sensed Electabuzz coming and whirled to counter attack. At first, Surge was sure he was seeing things, but when the fleshy, red flower growing out of the Machamp's chest began to glow with white-hot light, there was no denying the truth in the face of certain death. A metal transmitter wriggled over Machamp's head and dug into one of its eye sockets, pulsing like it was alive.

"Watch out!"

A sentient boulder tackled Electabuzz and rolled it out of the line of fire just as the Solar Beam decimated the area where it had been standing and the entire front of the elementary school just behind it. Surge swore and pressed himself against the wall of a house as he squinted at the Machamp, trying to believe what his eyes were telling

him.

"That thing looks like it swallowed a Venusaur. What the hell's goin' on?"

"Surge!"

Brock touched down on Archeops just south of him. A short distance farther north, Electabuzz recovered from the rough save by Brock's Golem and hunkered down on all fours, hissing and spitting. Golem barely paid it any mind and looked to Brock for further instruction.

"The fuck did I just see?" Surge said.

"That's one of the Chimera experiments, the genetic mutations Team Rocket's been doing in secret. Damn, that Machamp's not gonna be easy to take out."

Something whistled overhead, and Surge forced Brock down to the ground just as a potent Hyper Beam rained down like divine lightning and swerved toward Machamp. Gary banked Aerodactyl to the right, but Machamp blew out another Solar Beam skyward in an attempt to shoot Aerodactyl down.

"Lieutenant, we have a problem!"

Sandra and Electrode were half a block farther north with Electabuzz and Golem, and she pointed to Wall Pythia's gate, which loomed only a few city blocks to the north. Standing guard in front of it, though, was a wall of sixty or seventy Magnemite that had been fused together at the joints to create a sheet-like barrier in front of the gate.

Surge gritted his teeth and closed a hand over the dog tags around his neck. "Fuck me."

Steelix and Onix were still farther back contending with a renewed wave of Rocket and Psychic trainers, while the rest of the Pewter and Cerulean forces coordinated to keep them out of harm's way and clear a path to the gate as best they could. Raichu squeaked to Surge's right and began to spark. He patted the hefty rodent on its head and stood up.

"Listen kid," Surge said to Brock. "You get your Steelix in there as fast as you can. No more fuckin' around with those small fries. I'll send Sandra and my soldiers to help you out."

"What're you gonna do?"

Surge looked back at the impregnable wall of Magnemite that electrocuted anything that got too close. "I'm gonna put those sons o' bitches outta their misery."

"Surge, no way, you'll get fried. Even you can't handle that much electricity."

"Did I ask your opinion, rock boy? Shut the fuck up and get movin' if you wanna make it through Wall Pythia sometime this year."

Brock glared at him but didn't argue further. He mounted Archeops once more and nodded to Surge. "Don't die so easy, old man."

"Yeah, yeah."

Brock recalled Golem and took off toward Steelix and Onix. Surge jogged to Electabuzz and Sandra, relayed his orders, and set his sights on the gate.

"Lieutenant, with all due respect, this isn't something you should do alone," Sandra protested.

"You questionin' my orders?"

Sandra flushed. "Sir, if there's a high chance of your death, then I have to speak up." She paused before adding, "I...fear this may be more than even you can handle."

Surge put a hand on her shoulder. She was a couple inches taller than him, but his hand was heavy and made her slump a little.

"The only thing a soldier's afraid of is pussyin' out on a chance to hit the enemy where it hurts. So go help Brock and get that Steelix to haul ass to the wall. That's an order, Cadet."

She bit her lip and nodded stiffly. Unshed tears welled in her eyes as she saluted him. "Stay alive, sir. Please consider that an order from your humble subordinate."

She jogged to the south and shouted for the other Vermilion trainers to follow. Surge took a moment to watch her go, expression hard. He chuckled to himself.

"Women. Thinkin' they can order me around."

His two Magneton hovered overhead and hummed, sensing the aberration of their kind up ahead.

"Well, I do hate makin' 'em cry. Let's get this over with fast so she'll cut that shit out."

The aberrant Machamp had run off after Gary, so there was no real threat in Surge's path as he led his team of Electric Pokémon to Wall Pythia's sturdy gate. Some of Erika's warriors were backed up a block from the gate. Erika herself spoke to them in hushed tones as they attempted to come up with a strategy. When she saw Surge, though, she approached him.

"You, stay the hell outta my way if you wanna get through that gate," he bit out as he ran past her.

"Surge, wait! The Magnemite—"

But he was already gone and signaled to his Pokémon.

"Oi! Over here!"

Raichu, Electabuzz, and the two Magneton lit up like light bulbs and began throwing errant bolts of lightning at the steel wall of Magnemite. Behind the wall, a handful of Rocket Grunts outfitted in special, rubber suits pointed handheld computers at the Magnemite. As a single unit, the tiny Magnet Pokémon shifted their focus away from Erika's trainers to Surge himself. Dozens of vapid eyes stared down at Surge and his team, whose electric attacks did little more than annoy the fused Magnemite.

That's right, you little fuckers. Follow the leader.

The wall began to spark and pop as every Magnemite generated its own Thunderbolt to launch directly at Surge.

"To me!"

His four Pokémon flanked him and sparked as they roared and spit and raised their hackles at the legion of Magnemite. Electabuzz drew scratches in the cobblestone with its sharp claws. Someone, Erika perhaps, screamed at him from behind but dared not get any closer. He raised his left fist at the Magnemite and pointed the right one at the sky behind him.

"Come on!"

The wall flashed with blinding, golden light and seared the air, turning it to ozone that burned Surge's throat and chest as he breathed in. An amalgamated Thunderbolt arced from the wall and descended upon Surge and his team like a sun flare. He grunted in pain when the electricity made contact with his gloved fist and rocketed through his body, curling around his core as it searched for openings to exploit. The four Pokémon at his sides trembled with the effects of the mega lightning bolt, unused to absorbing so much energy in one sitting. Raichu screeched and raised its tail high over its head like a lightning rod.

"Damn...Rocket scum," Surge managed as his body screamed in pain and began to smoke.

His hair stood on end and blood leaked from his ears, but still he maintained his stance and slowly brought his right arm around to align with the left. Shouts and screams filled the air as Erika likely ordered her trainers to retreat as much as possible, but he ignored them. Behind the wall of Magnemite, the Rocket Grunts were hunched over their computers and frantically pushing buttons.

Surge brought his fists together and blinked the tears from his eyes. They sparked and drew small boils in their tracks down his cheeks. "You think you can run *me* out with a little lightning?" he shouted with what little air remained in his lungs. "Think again, assholes!"

The two Magneton that hovered over his head came together at opposite polarities and hummed ever louder. The Magnemite wall doubled its efforts and increased the voltage of its attack, an attack that should have fried any normal person in their boots like an ant under a magnifying glass. But Surge still stood tall and defiant at his full five feet two inches and bared his teeth in a grin.

"Zap Cannon!"

Raichu, Electabuzz, and the two Magneton exploded with cold light that jumped from Surge's right fist and arced with incredible celerity back at the wall of Magnemite as a humongous ball lightning. It hit the Magnemite just off-center and pierced a hole in their defense, forcibly ripping them apart. Like dominoes, the whole wall of Magnemite fell under the ripple effect, short-circuited by the redirected lightning and unable to reabsorb it in time.

The Rocket Grunts controlling the Magnemite screamed and tried to scatter, but the engorged ball lightning hit Wall Pythia itself over the

gate and tore into the stone with intangible talons. A fissure opened up and raced to the top of the black wall as the lightning ate through the natural weaknesses in the stone and forced them open, like unwilling flesh under a surgeon's knife. Chunks of wall came loose and crashed to the ground, where they buried the collapsing Magnemite and the Rocket Grunts under tons and tons of black stone and ash.

In the twelve or thirteen seconds since the wall of Magnemite launched its combined Thunderbolt at Surge, Wall Pythia was compromised, the last major adversarial threat guarding it was wiped out, and the path to the weakened gate was momentarily clear for Onix and Steelix.

Surge sank to his knees, coughed up thick, bloody spittle, and slumped to the ground, face-down. Over the sounds of his fluttering heart in his waterlogged ears, footsteps approached, both heavy and light, and a woman shouted some orders. The last thing he felt were hands on his back that flipped him over, and someone loomed over him, a dark silhouette against the glare of thunder that still seared the backs of his eyes.

"Don't you fucking die, old man!"

He coughed again and spilled sticky blood and saliva over his chin.

Damn women, always tellin' me what to do...

Blessed darkness settled over him, taking with it the pain, the voices, and the hands that lifted his body up.

When the flash finally died down and squeezing her eyes shut managed to offer some semblance of comforting darkness, Lily slowly regained full consciousness. Oxygen flooded her brain and her throat ached where Archer had tried to strangle her. She rolled over and coughed violently. Slowly, her senses returned and she became aware of a strange, but not unpleasant, tingling on her skin, like goosebumps.

A faint, silver aura dusted her skin and clouded her vision, like looking through a veil of smoke. It covered every inch of her body, but the phantom itch coiled most potently around her thumb. She touched a finger to the steel ring Steven had given her, and it buzzed under her fingertips.

She was so absorbed in the strange phenomenon that it took her a

moment to focus beyond the ring on the figure lying next to her. A rush of abject horror struck her like a bucket of ice water, and she yelped. Archer, or what remained of him, was bent and broken on the floor oozing blood that had congealed to the point of being almost semi-solid. It leaked from every orifice in his face, and his skin was stretched so taut that it had cracked open. A mercurial pous poured from the tiny fissures in his face and dripped into his mouth, which was wrenched open in a mask of fear.

"W-What—"

"Can you stand on your own?"

The voice startled her so badly that her heart skipped a beat. Steven stood over her, also glowing with a faint, silvery hue. His Metagross stood next to him on four crab-like appendages. Its steel-plated hide smoked with the same silvery aura, and its pit-like eyes stared directly at her with recognizable intelligence possessed of only the most developed and seasoned Psychics.

"Lily."

Steven held a hand out for her.

She swallowed and winced at the pain in her neck. "How?" she whispered.

"My ring. It's forged from Metagross's horns, which are obviously immune to all its special attacks, including Flash Cannon."

When she still didn't accept his hand, he sighed. The faintest flicker of annoyance crossed his otherwise unfeeling eyes.

"I realize you've been through something traumatic for someone not used to this kind of...activity, but we have to move. I'd rather not leave you behind if I don't have to."

She raised a shaking hand and let him haul her up like she weighed nothing at all. This close, she could make out the sweat on his pale brow and the bruises forming under his skin. His left arm twitched faintly.

"You're hurt."

For some reason, he found that amusing and smiled. "I'm only human, after all. Shall we?"

She looked back the way they'd come and stared at the bodies, people and Pokémon, that lay in butchered piles. There was not a sound, not even a sign of movement. All the glass dividers between the individual lab rooms had shattered. The equipment was bent out of shape and morphed beyond recovery. The whole place was utterly wasted.

"Yeah," she said finally. "Right."

Steven strode along at a leisurely pace with Metagross in tow, who was surprisingly silent for such a large, heavy Pokémon. Lily followed, careful to step over and around the mutilated bodies blocking the way. She would have given anything to feel Pikachu's comforting weight on her shoulder, but she didn't have another ring to protect the yellow rodent should Steven decide to let Metagross loose again. They rounded a corner, and the farther they got from ground zero of Metagross's Flash Cannon, the more intact the lab was. By the time they reached the end of the hall and stopped in front of the familiar door to the Silver Wing lab, it was almost easy to pretend like she hadn't just walked through a mass grave. Only bloody footprints trailing behind her proved otherwise.

Steven raised a hand and signaled for her to remain silent. He leaned closer to the door and pointed at it. Voices were conversing inside, and she held up three fingers. Steven nodded and put a hand on Metagross's head, but a crashing sound somewhere down the hall behind them interrupted.

"Look out!" someone called.

Lily put up her hands in a defensive stance as a young man, in defiance of the laws of physics, closed the forty feet of hallway to her in a single bound. Behind him, a massive Arbok crashed into the wall and shattered the glass. It recovered quickly and hissed, spitting purple globs of poison. Two people dressed in uniforms similar to the Rocket Grunts Lily had seen in Fuchsia rounded the corner.

"Gunk Shot!" the woman shouted.

Arbok hissed and spat out an impressive glob of venom the size of a basketball that hurtled straight for Lily and Steven.

"Get down!"

The young man landed in front of them and spread his arms, and the violet mist he wore like a cape grew and fed a roiling, purple cloud that rose behind him and filled the hallway. Disembodied cackling

emanated from within it, and Lily recoiled in fear.

Steven, however, took the opportunity to have Metagross break down the secured door to the Silver Wing lab and disappeared within it.

"Who the heck're you?" Lily demanded.

The armored stranger looked at her funny. His Pikachu squeaked down at her curiously.

"Me? Who're *you*? This is no place for a cute girl!"

Something crashed in the lab behind them, and Lily dodged inside after Steven. Santos was backing up against the floor-to-ceiling window behind him with one hand up. The other was cuffed to an aluminum briefcase.

"Stay back!" he said.

Chul and Han had frozen in their spots at the sight of Metagross.

"Where's the Silver Wing?" Steven said softly.

"Don't come any closer!"

Steven reached out a hand. "Just hand it over, and I'll let you live."

"Gengar!"

The boy in red burst in after Lily, and she turned just in time to get tackled to the floor. Arbok came flying in through the door and cracked the opaque, glass walls as it hurtled through the air. Steven and Metagross leaped out of the way, but Chul and Santos were not so light of foot. Arbok slammed into them and hit the window, which burst into a million pieces. A red Pokéball laser saved the huge snake from falling, but the high wind speeds sucked Chul out. He screamed, but the sound was drowned out in the winds as he fell thirty-seven stories to his death.

"James, the Silver Wing!" Jessie hissed. "He's got it!"

Santos, who'd managed to grab onto the edge of a stainless steel table, was buffeted by the high-speed winds and lost his grip. With a shriek, he tripped over himself and got sucked outside.

"Steven!" Lily screamed.

He was way ahead of her and recalled Metagross. Without so much as a hint of hesitation, Steven sprinted across the room and jumped out the window after Santos.

"James!" Jessie shrieked.

James released his Pidgeot, and the huge bird flapped its great wings in surprise at its cramped surroundings. The Gust was enough to send Lily tumbling to the edge. She scratched her fingers across the floor, desperate to latch onto anything, but the tile was slick and the winds were strong.

"No!" the boy with the Pikachu shouted as he got up and ran after her.

James mounted Pidgeot and urged the large bird forward. It jumped and sped through the open window like a bullet, fearless of the ripping wind currents. Lily screamed and reached blindly for anything to stop her from tumbling over the edge, and her hand closed around a metal cordon that had come free with the window pane. It ripped a terrible burn into her palm, but she held on with all her strength.

"Grab my hand!"

The boy reached for her over the edge with one hand on the sill to keep him from sharing her fate.

"I can't! I'll fall!"

"I'll catch you!"

Below, Steven had released a Skarmory and raced at breakneck speeds to catch Santos before he hit the ground. James and Pidgeot rocketed after him just as the silver bird closed its steel talons around Santos and hauled him up. The winds were ruthless, and Lily screamed again when they buffeted her against the wall of the building. She lost her grip and slipped, the pain in her raw palms too great.

And she fell.

The boy reached for her and shouted something, but she couldn't hear him as she sank farther away from him, her hand outstretched in vain. Tears blurred her vision, and gravity brought with it sound and the realization that this was the end, she would die today after all, splattered on the pavement like a bug on a windshield, and not even the Champion of Hoenn could do anything to help her now.

But through her blurred, double vision, she saw the boy jump out the window after her with his Pikachu latched firmly upon his shoulder. He shouted at her again, but the winds drowned out his voice. And there was nothing anyone could do, logically speaking, because who in their right mind jumps out of a skyscraper after a girl he doesn't even know with no ostensible rescue plan or shred of regard for his own safety?

But still, she reached for him desperately if only not to be alone in the vacuum sucking her down and down to the unforgiving pavement below.

"Help me!" she screamed.

Five hundred yards of skyscraper seemed a lot shorter as she fell and brushed her fingertips against his. The glass-covered floors raced by faster and faster as she reached terminal velocity.

"I gotcha!"

He grabbed her hand and pulled until they were falling together, and she locked them together in a crushing embrace. His Pikachu squeaked in fear as it held on for dear life against the rushing winds, and Lily squeezed her eyes shut, hoping the impact at least wouldn't hurt. A quick death after everything she'd been through was a pittance to ask for.

Laughter cut through the wind, a bone-chilling cackle that somehow rang out over the winds, like they held no power to subdue it, and the next thing she knew there was nowhere left to fall.

The crash to the ground thundered with the force of an earthquake. Shards of cobblestone, dirt, and dust erupted all around and pelted her mercilessly. But when the initial jolt of impact passed and she was still breathing, she tentatively opened her eyes, wondering if this had all been a dream because there was no way, not in this world or any other, that she could have survived such a drop.

Amber eyes peeked open through a violet haze not unlike the one Metagross had imparted to her back inside. Beyond the veil, the ground for about five yards in all directions sank into a crumbling crater filled with broken cobblestone, thick shards of glass, and the grass long buried under the pavement.

"You've got a hell of a grip," a voice whispered in her ear.

His breath was hot against the shell of her ear, and she instantly pulled away only to slip. There was no ground under her feet. She yelped and clawed at the boy's armor to hold on.

He laughed, and a rough, pink tongue licked her forehead. His Pikachu, who seemed perfectly content with whatever the *hell* was going on, blinked dark eyes at her.

"Sorry, I remember my first time doing this was kinda scary, too."

His arms loosened around her waist and he gently lowered her to the solid ground just a few inches underfoot. Lily would have fallen over if she hadn't been holding onto him, and he kept his hand on the small of her back to help her get her bearings.

"Better?"

Her breaths came in shallow, sucking bursts, and she looked up beyond him. Almost five hundred yards overhead, the Silph tower loomed as tall as ever and disappeared among the clouds. Just looking up at it made her dizzy.

"I... How did you...?"

The violet glow dissipated, and a set of smoldering, red eyes looked down at her over the boy's head.

"I didn't do much. Gengar's the one who broke our fall. Ghosts're pretty amazing!"

Gengar burst out laughing, and Lily stared between it and the boy who'd somehow managed to keep his ratty, red cap after falling thirty-seven stories. The absurdity of the situation, and maybe the fact that by some stroke of the miraculous she was still alive, drew a hesitant giggle that blossomed into a full-on laugh as she cried into his chest.

"Um..."

She shuddered and looked up at him with a brilliant smile through her tears. "Yeah, they definitely are," she laughed.

He searched her face, a little dazzled by her bright smile until Pikachu nipped him in the ear. He broke out into a goofy smile of his own and dropped his hand to her waist to give her some breathing room.

"I'm Ash," he said. "Didn't get a chance to introduce myself when I

literally ran into you up there, hah."

She shook her head, and her legs wobbled as they still tried to get used to solid ground after the sheer drop. "Lily. And I'm *really* happy you ran into me, obviously."

A high-pitched squawk drew their attention, and Lily dropped her smile. James and Pidgeot had caught up to Skarmory, and now the two mounted Flyers were duking it out over their coveted prize. Santos was jostled violently in Skarmory's talons as it tried to dodge the larger bird, but Pidgeot was fast and powerful. It closed an enormous talon around Santos's leg, and he screamed as the birds pulled apart. Pidgeot ripped his entire leg from his body and dropped it, while Steven steered Skarmory away.

"Oh my god." Lily covered her mouth in horror as she followed Santos's leg in its deadweight drop to the ground, where it landed with a splat.

"Shit, they're tearing that guy apart!" Ash reached for a Pokéball, but Lily stayed his hand.

"No, don't interfere. You'll only get in Steven's way."

"What're you talking about? They're gonna kill that guy!"

She gritted her teeth and watched as the birds battled over Santos's body. Pidgeot blasted Skarmory with a powerful Whirlwind, and it was enough to shake Santos loose. He cried out as he fell, but Steven threw a Pokéball and another Skarmory soared out of the light. He shouted at it, and the steely bird dove head-first after Santos. Pidgeot squawked and tried to intercept, but Steven and his first Skarmory swooped in and tackled it with a Steel Wing so sharp that it sliced clean through Pidgeot's belly.

Pidgeot wailed in pain as its belly opened up and spilled bloodied entrails. James screamed unintelligibly from the bird's back, and they plummeted to the earth together. Steven's second Skarmory shot past them on its way up clutching Santos's handcuffed arm and shoulder, but nothing else.

"Holy crap," Ash said as he climbed out of the crater. "I think he just killed James!"

Steven and his two Skarmory floated to the ground and landed in the garden that stretched an entire city block in Silph's back yard. Lily

climbed out after Ash and they jogged to the garden's gated entrance together. It was a natural oasis carefully maintained and beautifully preserved for public enjoyment, complete with weathered, stone benches, a hand-carved swing set under a large oak tree, and a wide, man made lake in the center dotted with lily pads and white lotus flowers. Steven touched down at the southern edge and slipped off Skarmory's back just as Ash and Lily caught up.

"Steven!" she said.

He looked up and immediately settled his gaze on Ash. "You. That was quick thinking upstairs with your Gengar. You must be a Medium to be able to command it like you did."

"You're a Tamer," Ash said. "That aura... It's like Brock's, grey like iron."

Steven smirked. "I suppose there's no hiding from a Medium's gaze. I'm an Adamantine."

"Wait, what?" Lily said. "Hold on, what's a Tamer? And what's that got to do with anything? Did you get the Silver Wing?"

Steven fixed her with an unreadable look. "Still so many questions. Yes, I got the briefcase."

He approached his Skarmory, which towered over him and ruffled their slate-grey feathers that glistened in the afternoon sun like true steel. Their wicked beaks were only overshadowed by their curved, raptor talons that dug into the solid stone underfoot. Steven bent down to pick up the briefcase and yanked the end of the handcuff off its handle with his bare hands. The severed arm he tossed aside, and his Skarmory dove for it and pulled it apart as they vied for the free meal.

Ash glanced at Lily. "You mean, you don't know? But you're one, too. I can see it."

"Huh? What're you talking about?"

An explosion racked Wall Pythia not far from there, and soon shouts of panic broke out as people dressed in Rocket uniforms and bearing the Saffron Gym crest poured into the garden to escape whatever had lain siege to the impregnable wall. A thick crag bloomed over the gate and raced to the top of the wall, where it loosed thick slabs of ebony stone that crashed to the ground.

"Damnit," Ash swore. "These guys dunno when to quit!"

He tossed three Pokéballs and released a squat Blastoise, a Venusaur with an old gash in its front leg, and a hopping mad Charizard whose back was caked with dried blood. Upon spotting Ash's opposition, the Rocket trainers and their Psychic allies released their own Pokémon. A hefty Machamp led the pack with such large, beefy Pokémon as Donphan, Piloswine, and a pair of Nidoking and Nidoqueen. The Psychic trainers backed up their Rocket allies with Kadabra, Hypno, and a Slowbro that waddled toward the lake. Outnumbered and seemingly outgunned, Ash's Pokémon nonetheless stepped forward to face the challenge.

"So, the invaders have breached Wall Pythia," Steven said.

"What will you do?" Lily asked.

"I have no further business here." His gaze shifted to Ash. "But...it would be a shame if you two died now after surviving the fall." He glanced back at his feasting Skarmory, and they immediately ceased their squabbling. "Take your pick."

The birds squawked menacingly and took to the skies, where they began to circle and pick out their next targets with their sharp eyes. Steven selected two of the remaining three Pokéballs at his belt and rotated them about each other in his hand.

"I'll fight, too," Lily said. "I'm sick of letting you do all the work."

Steven chuckled softly, and Ash looked back at her. "Good. But remember what I told you."

Lily grabbed the four Pokéballs at her belt and tossed them all out. Pikachu burst forth first and landed next to her, squeaking in anticipation. A towering Dodrio landed on her other side, and its three heads poked at each other before she laid a hand on the bird's wingless flank to get its attention. The other two lights flashed over the man made lake, and two shadows rippled below the surface.

She ran forward to stand with Ash where their Pikachu fell into step, sparking and making the air pop with electricity.

"Haven't had enough for one day?" he teased.

"Actually, I'm finally getting started."

Behind them, Steven casually tossed out his two Pokéballs. Metagross landed silently to his left, but his Aggron shook the ground when its weight crashed onto the dirt path. It towered as tall as Tyranitar, and thick, steel scales covered it like hammered silver. It roared, and Lily covered her ears to the atrocious, grinding sound. The smaller Psychic Pokémon hesitated at the sound, but the Machamp beat all four of its fists over its chest, blood boiling in challenge.

The Piloswine shook out its thick fur and breathed a snowy gust of wind over the lake. Ash signaled to Blastoise to shoot it down with its water canons, but Lily beat him to it.

"Dragon Pulse!"

The lake frothed and parted in a geyser of water and sanguine light that arced out of the water and slammed into Piloswine with enough momentum to send the heavy Pokémon flying into its trainer behind it. They both hit one of the large oak trees at the edge of the garden and split the trunk on impact. From the depths of the lake, a colossal Kingdra powered down its attack and fell back into the water with a splash.

"Aw, *hell* yeah! You guys still wanna piece of this?" he taunted the Rocket Agents.

They shouted and began to run around the lake alongside their Pokémon, eager to prove their worth. Pikachu sparked next to Lily, and she nodded down at it. In a flash of thunder and a raucous battle cry, the fighting began.

16. Saffron City, Part 3

Triumvirate, chapter 16: Saffron City, Part 3
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

"Ice Beam!"

Daisy's command brought forth bolts of frigid light from her Dewgong that zipped toward Hypno, but the Psychic glowed with telepathic energy and buffeted the attacks. They ricocheted off it and hit the ceiling, which froze on contact. Misty dove into the moat alongside the Pokémon and disappeared below the surface.

"Psybeam!" the five Psychic trainers shouted all at once.

"Get down!"

Violet pushed Daisy into the water just as the enemy Pokémon unleashed a rippling wave of silver energy that hurtled toward Violet and Yusuke.

"Focus Energy!" Yusuke shouted.

Marowak leaped in front of him and twirled its twin bone clubs with surprising dexterity and speed. They spun like pinwheels, indiscernible blurs. Fearing for its trainer, Blastoise hunkered down next to Marowak to brace itself for the super-powered Psybeams. Silver light slammed into the two Pokémon and slaked off them to hit Violet and Yusuke. Violet tumbled backwards and skidded across the floor. Pain erupted in her shoulder where the concentrated energy struck her and shredded the muscles and capillaries beneath her armor and skin, which did little to protect against the intangible energy. Blastoise grunted, having retreated to its shell to protect itself from the worst of the attack.

Yusuke, however, had been quicker and crouched down directly behind Marowak and its spinning femurs, which now glowed with a faint, green light absorbed and amplified by the Psychic energy. "Bonemerang!"

Marowak bellowed and threw the two bone clubs in succession.

"Stop them!" one of the Psychic trainers shouted from the other side of the moat.

A Girafarig galloped forward and began to pulse with silvery light to intercept the flying clubs, but Gyarados burst from the water with Misty on its back. She pointed at Girafarig, and Gyarados leaped out of the water. Drenched, it turned over itself in mid-air and crashed down on top of Girafarig with a tremor-inducing Aqua Tail. Misty rolled off her Pokémon just as it made contact and sprinted toward the Psychic trainers across the way. Girafarig's head crunched and the light around it faded. The second head on its tail, however, bit at Gyarados's tough scales even as the main brain died. The blue water Dragon roared and flung Girafarig's pulpy remains at its trainer, where it nearly slammed into Hypno.

The two Bonemerangs soared over Misty's head where Kadabra stopped one in mid-flight with telekinesis. The other one, still glowing with Focus Energy's boost, hit Hypno's trainer in the back and sent him crumpling to the ground. He screamed and tried to pull himself up on his elbows, but his legs didn't respond. Hypno backed up and crouched down over its trainer, who'd begun to bleed from his mid-back.

"Misty!" Daisy screamed when she broke the water's surface with her two Dewgong.

But Misty sprinted and tossed out a few Pokéballs without slowing down. Even before the lights faded, she jumped and thrust her fists forward. Gyarados slipped back into the water and reared its great head in a roar. Vaporeon, Golduck, and Gyarados spat out three perfectly coordinated Hydro Pumps.

"Confusion!" she shouted just as her Pokémon blasted the pressurized water.

Starmie spun through the air and released a sapphire glow that shot out from its multiple legs and merged with the Hydro Pumps, guiding them in curved arcs that honed in on the targets. The enemy Psychics scrambled behind their Pokémon and shouted for a counter attack. Mr. Mime's webbed hands drew up a Barrier that managed to stop one of the guided Hydro Pumps when it slammed into the invisible wall.

Aiming for the trainers themselves, one of the remaining two Hydro Pumps hit the other Girafarig's trainer and flung her against the rock wall. Girafarig's two heads shrieked and it attempted to help its master, but the enchanted water was strong enough to crush through solid stone. By the time the attack died down, the Psychic trainer was embedded into the stone wall in a jagged crater. Her arms and legs

were contorted at unnatural angles, and her pale flesh was already turning black and blue with internal bleeding.

The other Hydro Pump was intercepted by Kadabra and a formidable Psychic attack that overpowered Starmie's Confusion and veered the water off course, where it slammed harmlessly into the stone ceiling. The force of the water was so great, however, that it broke up chunks of rock that toppled to the ground. Kadabra's trainer got stuck under them and screamed when his leg was buried under a falling rock.

"Hell yeah!" Violet whooped. "Blastoise, get in there with Rapid Spin!"

Blastoise loped forward on all fours and jumped into the air over the moat, where it once again retracted into its shell and began to spin. The centrifugal force carried it along in an arc toward the enemy Pokémon just as Daisy emerged from the water and signaled her Dewgong to attack with Ice Beam again.

The frigid bolts of ice raced through the air at Mr. Mime and its unscathed trainer just ahead of Blastoise. Mr. Mime and its trainer barely had time to scream when the icy bolts hit them. Frost bloomed on their exposed flesh and covered them like a second skin until it reached the ground, where it drew wicked icicles that glued the two of them in place. Mr. Mime tried to lurch toward its trainer, but the ice froze fast.

Blastoise collided with them with blinding force and shattered them into bloody, frozen chunks of flesh and bone, brittle. A frozen arm shattered at the elbow rolled to the edge of the moat and plopped into the water, where it left a thin trail of thawing blood as it sank to the bottom.

Daisy grinned and followed Misty's path with Dewgong lumbering along beside her, but she didn't make it two steps before Hypno suddenly Teleported in front of her. The crude pendulum it carried swayed back and forth as it stared her down, like its very presence was enough to freeze her in place the way her Dewgong had frozen the Mr. Mime and its trainer.

"Get out of there!" Yusuke shouted as he struggled to get to the moat.

"What's going—" Violet started.

"Dream Eater!" Hypno's broken trainer shouted from his bloody heap on the ground.

Hypno slitted its eyes and grabbed Daisy's face with a glowing, red paw. It sank its claws into her skin as the crimson hue it emitted engulfed her head.

"Daisy!" Misty cried out when she turned back and saw what was happening.

Daisy's eyes rolled back in her head and her jaw lolled. Her body began to slump, and by the time her Dewgong caught up to her and tried to ram Hypno with their horned heads, it quickly leaped away.

Daisy fell to the ground on her side just as Violet and Yusuke jumped in the water and swam to the other side. Misty clutched her head in her hands, shaking as tears streamed down her face. The two Dewgong surrounded Daisy's unmoving body and barked, trying to rouse her.

"Dragon Rage!" Misty shouted as she threw her last Pokéball.

Gyarados reared up and breathed a sinister, crimson mist while Kingler appeared from Misty's final Pokéball and scuttled across the rock toward Hypno's trainer. The man tried to crawl away on his elbows but barely made it a few inches.

"Kill him," she ordered.

"No!"

Kingler descended on the Psychic trainer over his pathetic struggling and slammed its oversized pincer into his head. Immediately, his wailing ceased and he fell still, but Kingler continued to Crabhammer the guy's skull into oblivion. Bits of bone and brain matter splattered through the air each time the large crab brought its pincer down for another crushing blow.

Hypno, now trainer-less, faced Gyarados's Dragon Rage all on its own and did its best to counter with a Psychic attack, but the water Dragon outclassed it both in size and force of will. The sinister, red energy enveloped Hypno and tore into its jaundiced body. Skin peeled back and muscles tore open, flayed from the bone as the draconian power seeped into its bones with ancient fury. Hypno's blood evaporated before it could splash the ground, and it fell. Its flesh lay in tatters, cheese-grated to a bloody pulp.

"Daisy!"

Violet made it across the moat twice as fast as Yusuke despite her injury and didn't wait for him. She sprinted to her younger sister's side and pulled her up. She nearly dropped her again in fear and disgust at what she saw. Daisy's face was a mask of fear and agony. The skin was desiccated and wrinkled like an old woman's. Her eyes were rolled into the back of her head and leaked a pinkish substance. Even her tongue was crusty and dried out in the back of her throat. Violet's eyes filled with tears as she began to tremble.

"Bonerush!"

Yusuke and Marowak finally made it to the other side of the moat, where Marowak took off toward Kadabra's trainer. The Psychic intercepted and took the powerful physical attack for its trainer. Marowak stabbed its bone club, the one that had returned to it after paralyzing Hypno's trainer, in Kadabra's chest all the way to the hilt. Kadabra's weight clung to the club as its eyes dilated and the life slipped out of it. Its trainer, half buried by rocks, could only watch in despair as his Pokémon's body slipped off the bone and landed on the floor next to him. He screamed, but Marowak flipped the bone club around and brought the sawed off sharp end down through his skull between the eyes.

One last trainer remained, and he was trying to escape through the staircase in the back wall. Misty, who had gone deathly silent, ran after him with Vaporeon and pulled a knife. She made a slashing motion, and Vaporeon leaped at the fleeing trainer. It spun and smacked the guy with its finned tail and knocked his head into the wall. Misty caught his shoulder and yanked him back into the room before he could make it up the stairs. She twirled her knife and bent down on one knee as she pressed it to his throat.

"You don't scare me," he said.

Misty gritted her teeth and stabbed her knife into his arm. He hissed in pain and rolled over to clutch it. "I don't," she said. "But he should."

Gyarados growled low in its throat and loomed high over the pair of them. The Psychic trainer's eyes went wide and he began to scramble away. But Misty blinked back the tears in her eyes as she rose and flicked her wrist. Gyarados opened its great maw and shot forward. The Psychic trainer's screams were muffled as the water Dragon closed its gargantuan jaws around his upper half and hauled him back to the water, where it crunched him in half and slinked below the surface. A cloud of red blood bloomed in the water around Gyarados's long

dorsal fin as it cut through the surface in a lazy swim, feasting.

Silence descended among the remaining three trainers as Violet held Daisy's body close and rocked it back and forth. Misty dropped her knife with a clatter and stared at her older sisters a short distance away. She said nothing.

"Misty," Yusuke said softly. "I'll go on ahead. Please, stay with your sisters."

Misty blinked and turned to look at him like she'd only just noticed he was there. All of a sudden, something rumbled the cavern and cost everyone their balance. Something cracked in the distance, an explosion from somewhere above ground. The ceiling where a Hydro Pump had already created a hole and chipped away at the stone began to crack, and chunks of rock started to fall. Violet rose with Daisy's body, which was heavy in her arms.

"Oh no," Yusuke said. "We must go, now!"

He recalled Marowak and headed for the stairs. Misty recalled all her Pokémon and ran to Violet.

"Move!" she said.

Violet fumbled for Daisy's two Pokéballs and recalled both Dewgong and her Blastoise. Together, the sisters dragged Daisy's body toward the stairs where Yusuke was waiting.

"This way!"

He ran up the stairs with the sisters in tow just as the cavern began to cave in. The narrow stairwell shook as they stumbled along, eventually coming upon a small room lit with flickering torches. An old man in iron shackles sat cross-legged on the floor. His robe was in tatters, and he bore old and new bruises and cuts on his face from obvious beatings. Old blood stained his long, grey beard.

"Master Anko!" Yusuke said, dashing toward the old man.

"Iwaishi? What on earth are you doing here? What's going on?"

"There's no time to waste, Master. We must get you out of here now! Can you stand?"

Yusuke helped the old man to his feet, and together they led the

sisters to another staircase in the wall. Cracks spider-webbed overhead, and debris spilled onto Violet's shoulders. She hissed in pain from her old wound courtesy of the Psybeam attack, but Misty pressed on faster. Daisy's lifeless feet dragged behind them as they raced against time to escape the structural collapse. Daylight streamed in from the opening up ahead that Yusuke revealed by sliding back the wood panelling that concealed this doorway. They burst through and reemerged in the Dojo's main arena, where weights had come loose and rolled around, tearing up the hardwood floor. Electricity zapped along the building's metal frame.

"We can't get out like this!" Violet said.

Master Anko spared the three sisters a glance, his dark eyes settling on Daisy hanging limp in between Misty and Violet. "Please, stand back. Iwaishi, in the pouch at my back, if you would be so kind."

Yusuke unstrapped the pouch at Anko's back and brought it around for him. There were three Pokéballs inside it. The ceiling began to collapse, and a skylight shattered overhead. Glass rained down, sparking with electric currents.

"This one," Anko indicated with his bound hands.

Yusuke tossed the Pokéball, and a ten-foot tall Machamp materialized from within the light. It honed in on its master and lumbered toward it.

"We need a way out, please," Anko calmly explained.

The Machamp slammed its two sets of fists together and looked around. With a huff, it dashed fearlessly at the sparking, western wall and lowered its head. Wood, cement, and metal exploded under its sheer force as it barrelled through the wall and made an opening free from electricity.

Yusuke helped Anko toward the exit.

"Hurry!" Misty said as she dragged Daisy's body along with Violet.

The ceiling was collapsing on top of them, dropping electrified pieces of metal and smoking glass onto the splintered floor. They stumbled out of the Dojo and staggered down the street. Violet collapsed on the cobblestone along with Misty and Daisy and looked back at the Dojo. It imploded slowly, unable to withstand the inundation of electricity.

"The hell?" she wondered aloud.

Misty flipped Daisy onto her back and ran her hands over her face. She said nothing as she stared in shock at her older sister, unrecognizable after the number Hypno had done on her.

"I am sorry for your loss," a kind voice said.

Anko, free of his shackles thanks to Machamp, stood over the sisters with Yusuke's support. His wrists were bruised and bloody, and the bags under his eyes belied his exhaustion and mistreatment. Still, he looked down on them with sad, kind eyes and genuine remorse in his tone.

"Please, if there is anything I can do after what you have clearly done for me, then name it."

Misty looked up at him with fierce, blue eyes that refused to give into fresh tears despite how they glistened. Blood and soot smeared her face as she searched his. "There's nothing you can do. There's nothing anyone can do."

"Misty." Violet tried to put a hand on her sister's shoulder, but Misty smacked her away and glared.

"*Don't* touch me."

Her jaw was clenched so tight, Violet was sure she'd crack a tooth if she kept it up.

"Don't touch me," she said again, softer this time as her voice hitched. She clutched Daisy to her chest and fisted her hair.

A loud crack just to the north drew Violet's attention, where a hyper-concentrated ball of lightning the likes of which she'd never even dreamed of crashed through a grotesque wall of Magnemite and hit Wall Pythia directly. It tore open the ebony stone like a wrecking ball.

"Oh my god," she said, covering her mouth. "Surge."

"Iwaishi," Anko said. "Rally the other Bellators and their Fighters. We must add our strength to the liberators if we are to end this fighting and prevent further casualties of war."

"Yes, Master."

Yusuke took off, and Violet could not tear her eyes away from the

collapsing Wall Pythia over the gate. Steelix and Onix were nearly upon it and gearing up to tear down the gate. She look back at Daisy and blinked her tears away.

"I'll be back in a minute. You," she said to Anko. "Keep an eye on her. She's the reason you're seeing the light of day again."

Anko and his Machamp watched Misty with dark eyes, and he nodded. "Of course."

It took every ounce of will in Violet's body to tear her eyes away from her broken sister and Daisy's body, but she couldn't just stand here while another person dear to her fell to this war that wasn't even hers. She sprinted along the streets and made her way quickly to the place where the massive static electricity cloud had originated. Houses were destroyed, collapsed under the errant lightning bolts and burning. Violet bypassed them all until she emerged at the mouth of Wall Pythia's gate. Surge, his black and yellow armor sparking, fell to his knees and sank to the ground. His Electric Pokémon surrounded him, also sparking.

"No," Violet gasped.

She sprinted to his side and shoved Raichu aside to get to him. Trembling hands held his face and traced over the electric burns in his skin, the thick scar bisecting his face, and his chapped lips.

"Don't you fucking die, old man!"

Erika and some of her Celadon Gym warriors ran up behind Violet now that the immediate threat was gone and began to move on the gate itself.

"Violet," Erika said.

Violet ignored her. "Damnit, don't you dare die on me, too."

Tears streamed down her face as the weight of the world, of this war weighed down her shoulders. It was too much, more than any one person could bear. And for what? She squeezed her eyes closed and pulled Surge to her.

Please...

Hands lifted him up, and Violet rose with them. The Vermilion Gym trainers had returned and hoisted up their leader's body.

"What happened?" Sandra demanded.

"He redirected about seventy Thunderbolts," Erika said. "I saw it myself."

The blood visibly drained from Sandra's face, and she fought for composure. Tears glistened in her eyes, but she held them back and swallowed. "We have to get him medical attention immediately."

Violet reached for the Pokéballs at her belt and released Blastoise and Daisy's two Dewgong. Her gaze lingered on the snow-white seals. "I'll escort him."

Sandra shook her head. "No, it should be me. He's my Gym Leader."

"And you think he'd want you to waste the opening he made for you? Hell no. You get your men through the gate and finish off Team Rocket."

Sandra blinked in surprise, and the other Vermilion trainers began to whisper among themselves. Sandra's gaze fell and she clenched her jaw. "Please, take care of him."

"Consider it done," Violet promised as she hoisted Surge over her shoulder with Blastoise's help.

Daisy's Dewgong looked up at her curiously, and she narrowed her teary eyes at them.

"Make sure the path stays clear," Violet commanded.

The two Dewgong waddled into position and obeyed, sharp eyes alert to threats. Violet and Blastoise followed at a sedate pace with Surge between them, and his Electric Pokémon trailed behind.

Aerodactyl banked a hard left to avoid a searing Solar Beam, and Espeon hissed. Gary wiped the sleeve of his armor over his face and smeared the half-dried, itchy blood out of his eyes.

Chimera, he thought.

Fury flared in the pit of his stomach at the sight of the aberration chasing him through the streets of Saffron. Initiating the mental link with Espeon, he wrapped an arm around the sleek feline to hold it in place.

Psychic.

Espeon's fur stood on end and the jewel on its forehead burst with crimson light. Aerodactyl shrieked as it felt the thick wave of telekinetic energy bypass it and hurtle toward Machamp. The four-armed Fighter roared, and the tech on its head squirmed as though with a life of its own. It powered up another Solar Beam, and Gary was forced to steer Aerodactyl in a low swoop.

The searing light collided with Espeon's Psychic attack. The Solar Beam undulated and shed molten drops, tiny sun flares that peeled away under the overwhelming Psychic energy. Machamp roared again, but in the end it didn't have the constitution to power a proper Solar Beam and staggered. Espeon overwhelmed it, and the Psychic energy engulfed the Solar Beam in a single gulp. Machamp didn't even know what had hit it when Espeon redirected the attack back on it. The flower on the Fighter's chest burned to a crisp, and raw, telekinetic energy ripped into Machamp's limbs and head with rapacious hunger. Grey skin peeled away to reveal bloody bones that shattered under the Psychic's force. Machamp jerked violently, and Aerodactyl swooped over its head just as it fell.

Back in the sky, Gary looked down on Dodona District as it burned. Everywhere, Rockets and Psychic trainers battled against the invaders with their lives on the line. Both sides suffered unforgivable losses, and both sides pressed on.

A loud crack drew Gary's attention, and he watched in horrified awe as a monstrous concentration of ball lightning punched through a wall of cruelly fused Magnemite and ripped into Wall Pythia. Rocks split and fell, launching deadly projectiles outwards of a hundred feet right over the Celadon Gym warriors' heads. Gary put a hand on Espeon's back and directed its sight to the crumbling wall.

Confusion!

Espeon pulsed with blue light and caught most of the falling debris, mostly small chunks, before they could crush the Celadon trainers. Below, Violet was busy dragging Surge away from the gate, and Gary stared down at them.

"No, Ash..."

Fresh tears bloomed in his eyes at the thought of having to break the news to Ash that Surge may not have survived the siege, and his whole body began to shake. Steelix and Onix were nearly at the wall,

but they had a few more blocks to cover. Eyeing the crack in the thick, black stone that Surge had made, Gary patted Aerodactyl's neck.

"Cut it open!"

Aerodactyl squawked angrily and sped toward the still-sparking wall. Its shale-encrusted wings went rigid, and it swooped along the wall's face. Gary jerked on impact, but the Stone Edge attack sliced through the ebony wall like it was jello, drilling a thick crag in the rock and expanding the gaping gash Surge had made.

"Gary!"

Brock swooped in on Archeops, and the ancient Flyer squawked menacingly at Aerodactyl. Espeon growled when it felt Aerodactyl's rocky scales rise up in warning at the sight of the other extinct Pokémon, and Gary tightened his grip on the pommel.

Stand down.

Aerodactyl squawked and looked back at Gary over its shoulder, its beady, black eye animalistic and glazed with adrenaline. But it allowed Gary to guide it in line with Brock and Archeops, though Brock was careful to keep some distance between them.

"Shit, what happened?" Brock called.

Gary glanced down at his arms, which were still splattered with Golduck's dried blood. "War happened! Feel free to take down Wall Pythia sometime this year!"

"Way ahead of you!"

He banked Archeops back toward the gate, where Onix and Steelix had finally arrived and Forrest was trying to get them to ram the wall. With a roar, Onix slammed its armored tail into the gate and dented the iron. When the larger Steelix slithered forward and overshadowed its smaller pre-evolution, the gate seemed to shrink under its imposing shadow. Gary watched with grim satisfaction as Brock commanded Steelix to use Iron Tail. With a crushing explosion of metal and stone, the gate caved in and eliminated the last resistance to the deep crags Surge and Gary had woven into the stone. Wall Pythia rumbled and went up in a cloud of dust the color of ash. The billowing debris cast a heavy shade over the several city blocks in front of the gate, and darkness briefly swallowed the swarming invaders.

Gary landed Aerodactyl a couple blocks from the destroyed gate and dismounted. The winged reptile nudged him in the shoulder with its rough beak, eyes dilating at the stench of blood masking Gary's natural scent. He stood there a moment and rested a hand on Aerodactyl's bone horn, not really seeing it.

"War, huh?" he whispered. "All because of one woman who sided with the wrong people."

He pressed his lips together, and Aerodactyl growled low in its throat. Rows of sharp teeth glistened beneath leathery lips, and slick saliva dripped from the corners of its mouth. Gary ran his hand over Aerodactyl's right horn, just inches from jaws he'd watched tear apart even the most fearsome species of Pokémon.

"*This is a dangerous world."*

Ash's warning, delivered in a heated argument over whether or not they should trust Ivy's mission to take down Team Rocket, stayed his hand on Aerodactyl. Clenching a fist to keep it from shaking, Gary averted his gaze to the crumbling Wall Pythia and the Saffron Gym that lay beyond it.

"There's only one real monster here, and I'm not losing anyone else to her."

Aerodactyl rumbled low and feral, and Gary ran his hand over the side of its snout, careless of the beast's teeth each as long as his forearm. Something nudged his knee, and Espeon looked up at him with depthless eyes, unsettling to stare into for too long. His migraine had not abated much, and the adrenaline rush brought on by Golduck's sudden and brutal death was starting to wear off.

"I can't stop now." He pressed two fingers to his temple and closed his eyes to the stabbing pain in his head. "I can't let it go like this."

He recalled Aerodactyl and headed for the ruined section of Wall Pythia, where what remained of the Celadon and Vermilion armies led the charge. Espeon trotted along beside him, sleek and silent. Golduck's death rattle echoed in his head with every step, and it was all he heard over the renewed fighting that had broken out past Wall Pythia, where the final defense Team Rocket and the Saffron trainers could throw up awaited. Green eyes zeroed in on the Gym in the distance beyond Silph Tower, and Gary slowly made his way to it.

Ivy descended the stone steps deeper and deeper into the Gym's subterranean stronghold, noting the increase in temperature and slight humidity that made her bangs stick to her forehead. The air was thick and sticky in her throat, like she'd swallowed a wad of cotton. Umbreon flattened its ears against the back of its head.

Though it was faint, Ivy's keen eyes picked up on the barest traces of light up ahead. Houndoom growled in warning, and she patted its head. The stairs eventually ended on solid ground, and the corridor expanded enough to allow for both Houndoom and Umbreon to walk alongside Ivy. The light ahead steadily grew brighter, and a low buzzing like a generator grew louder. Ivy kept one hand on Tyranitar's Pokéball and the other around one of her throwing knives.

Eventually, the corridor opened up into a spacious, natural cavern the equivalent of five or six stories tall. The cavern had been converted into an underground cathedral replete with gothic, stone arches and columns, stained glass, and black marble tiling. A backup generator hummed in the far corner and supplied power to floor sconces and electric torches in between arches. Their light flickered against the stained glass and cast red, yellow, and blue shadows over the weathered stone and tile. Ivy and her Pokémon stopped at the edge of the cathedral and zeroed in on the only other occupant.

A woman sat straight-backed in an old, wooden chair that had seen better days. Her knees and ankles were held close together, uncrossed, like someone had glued her in place, she was so stiff. Long, black hair hung straight and glossy about her shoulders and dusted her folded hands in her lap, a stark contrast to the white, loose one-piece she wore. Her eyes remained closed even when Ivy let her steps echo in the acoustic space.

Next to her stood a lean, hunched Pokémon that came up to her shoulders and twirled a silver spoon in each of its three-fingered hands. Alakazam, the most powerful Psychic-type Pokémon in Kanto and Johto, remained perfectly still as it watched Ivy with hollow, unfeeling eyes.

"I've been waiting for you, Messor," the woman said. "Ever since you connected with my Barrier, I knew you would come here, like a moth to the flame looking for an excuse to burn."

Ivy held back a cringe. Her voice was soft and a bit raspy, like she had not spoken out loud in some time. "Sabrina."

Sabrina smiled, but still her eyes remained closed. "It's been a very long time since anyone called me by that name. ...Or since I was addressed directly. I normally relay all my communications through Alakazam to my subordinates aboveground. But you... I can't pick you out from the shadows no matter how hard I try."

"Well, I'm here now, and I doubt you have to be Clairvoyant to know what's coming next."

Sabrina's smile faded, and she was once again a porcelain mask of cold indifference. "What's coming next? I remember...when she said that to me."

There was a short pause, and Ivy gritted her teeth.

"Erika," Sabrina trailed off.

"She asked me personally to come here, you know. Seems like she really hates you."

"Hate?" Sabrina chuckled lightly. "So I still hold such high regard in her eyes. I suppose this is the power of memories. They cling to us like a disease. Even I cannot shed them completely."

She fisted her hands, and Alakazam stiffened. Houndoom growled at Ivy's side and dripped hot drool on the tiled floor. Dark energy radiated from the imperfections in its protruding ribs.

"There is such a thing as soulmates, Messor. Two hearts that beat in perfect synchronicity... Somehow, they find each other. Like Erika found me."

Sabrina's expression was carefully blank with her eyes still closed, and it was impossible to get a reading on her. Even her voice lacked any intonation or lilt, like she'd recited such passionate words a thousand times before and they brought only ashes to her mouth.

"I'm a foreigner here, like you. I was born in Celadon, and I spent many years there as a girl. I'm sure it's not difficult for you to imagine what I was like as a child. Introverted and quiet, my gift grew in silence. But the other children could tell. Children always can. They possess a sense most adults do not. They know...when they're inferior. And they did what all children do to those who soar higher than them —they cut me down.

"This may be the part where you think Erika swooped in with her

perfect pedigree and boundless wealth to rescue me from the wicked bullies, but in fact, she led the pack. She was always a wolf among sheep. But what does a wolf do when it finds another wolf? There can only be one alpha."

Sabrina paused, and Ivy was struck by the dead silence in the cathedral. There was no sound of the war raging above them, no draft or dripping water. She repressed a shiver and placed a hand on Houndoom's head to hold onto something.

"I thought Erika was simple. She merely wanted someone she could order around, someone who could snarl and snap at the other kids with one look when things didn't go her way. I knew, in my mind, that one day when she turned her back to me to face the masses, it would be the last thing she would ever do. But I hesitated. 'Next time', I would tell myself. 'Just a little longer.' I suppose...even wolves can only survive in packs, always together, hunters in arms."

"So you were close," Ivy said, unsure where this was going. "Obviously she woke up and smelled the Roserade at some point."

Sabrina smirked. "Actually, I did. There's a hierarchy among Tamers. Sylvans share many qualities with Delphi. We both share our life forces with our Pokémon. It connects us and tethers us to this plane, to the earth and the sun and the sky. You Messor rely on the inevitability of death to form a connection with your Pokémon. You don't belong here.

"Erika and I were a force to be feared. She understood me as others never could. Perhaps you, being what you are, can comprehend the significance of finding such a comfort in another. Soulmates, you see, are not the spark of romance or unconditional love, but a bond that transcends such passion, for passion is necessarily transient and no love lasts forever, neither in magnitude nor in ardor."

Sabrina's words, so dispassionate and callously uttered, nevertheless brought tears to Ivy's eyes. She raised a hand to cover her heart, afraid the Clairvoyant could see inside it through closed eyes.

"Love doesn't last forever," Sabrina repeated. "It either dies young and pure, or it drags on long enough to mutate into a hatred so black and ugly that it moves its host to slaughter and destroy the love of others, just as Erika is doing now with this pointless siege.

"It's a funny thing, hatred. Walk along the razor's edge of love for long enough and you're bound to bleed over onto the other side. I wasn't

about to bleed myself dry for a pretender queen who dared to rule *me*."

"I'm not here to listen to your fucking babbling. You're a bitter woman who sided with the wrong guys, and now it's time to reap what you sewed. People like you think you can hide behind a mask and just show the world what they wanna see. Maybe that worked on the masses here in Saffron who were coward or stupid enough to let you into their chicken coop, but you can't hide from me. In the light or in the dark, I see right through you."

"And *I* see right through *you*, Green."

Ivy's heartbeat thundered in her chest with enough force to make her stagger forward a step. Umbreon hissed at the sudden change in her aura. "What...did you just call me?"

"The girl who got away," Sabrina went on. "The only leak Team Rocket's ever had. You're infamous, you know."

"What do you mean, the 'only'?"

Without warning, Sabrina stood up from her rickety chair. Her white pants billowed with a wind unseen and unfelt, and her dark hair framed her face perfectly, in a way most girls would envy. Beauty came as naturally to her as misanthropy.

"Silver," she said. "I believe that was his true name."

Ivy's frame shook, and it took every ounce of self-control in her body to keep her rooted to the spot and not give into the taunt that would surely end in her total evisceration by telekinesis. "*Tell* me," she demanded.

Sabrina reached for three Pokéballs secured to her hip. "If you came here thinking my Psychics' natural weakness to your Dark-types would be your trump card, then it's my pleasure to inform you you're mistaken. Perhaps something as trivial as type advantage would work on my subordinates, but it won't work on me."

Sabrina tossed out the three Pokéballs, and from within the flash of light, Mr. Mime, Hypno, and Slowbro joined Alakazam at her sides. Before Ivy could say anything to that, Sabrina pressed her palms together and raised them before her face, as if in prayer. All of a sudden, the air became a little harder to breathe as Sabrina and her Psychics sucked all the life out of the space and hoarded it for

themselves. The five of them, eyes closed, glowed with an eerie, golden light, and Sabrina herself levitated a couple feet off the ground. Ivy stared, mouth agape, as she finally opened her eyes. They were completely white and pupil-less, but they stared deep into her soul like no one ever had before.

Sabrina spread her arms, and her Pokémon opened their eyes as well. Milky-white eyes stared back at Ivy, all-seeing in their blindness. "Be happy, Messor," she bellowed. "Miracle Eye is a new power I created especially for you!"

Never in her life had Ivy felt so naked before another person, especially not a Clairvoyant like Sabrina. In her wildest nightmares, she'd imagined something dreadful beyond the likes of even Chimera, but nothing like this. The masks were off, and the shadows retreated from her back, taking with them the cushioning darkness she'd grown to love and depend on.

But Houndoom and Umbreon still stood by her side, and they quaked with fury at just breathing the same air as the Psychics across the way. Ivy reached for a Pokéball at her belt and ran her fingers around it. The laugh started as nothing more than a shudder, a little tremor deep in the pit of her stomach, but it soon escalated to a full-on cackle even Ash's Gengar might envy.

Sabrina bared her teeth in the first concrete display of raw emotion Ivy had seen from her yet.

"You know," Ivy said in between laughs, "in a way I'm honored Erika compared us. I see in you the monster I could've become." She calmed down enough to hold Sabrina's vacuous gaze and bared her teeth in a sinister smirk. "And I see the one I am."

She tossed out the Pokéball, and in a flurry of white light and earth-shaking force, Tyranitar coalesced and reared its spiked head in a devastating roar that chilled even Ivy to the bone. The green dinosaur bared its six-inch incisors at Sabrina and her team, unafraid and thirsty for blood.

"So let's see which one of us'll devour the other. *My* money's on Tyranitar."

Sabrina's jaw was clenched so tight she could have broken a tooth. Nevertheless, her first command came as barely a whisper. "Psybeam."

All four of her Psychics reared up and fired off silvery bolts of Psychic

energy at Ivy, and her Pokémon jumped to intercept.

"Dark Pulse!"

All three radiated a stygian wave of energy that instantly dissipated the Psybeams and careened straight for the Psychics. All but Slowbro were quick to jump or Teleport to dodge, but the fubsy Pokémon took the hit head-on and slammed into one of the marble columns behind it with a sickening crack. The spiral shell on its tail cracked and crumbled, and it struggled to get back on its feet. Ivy paid it no mind and drew one of the knives at her hip.

"Hyper Beam!"

Tyranitar roared and spat out a thick shaft of orange light that zigzagged toward Alakazam, but the Psychic stopped it with its telekinesis and managed to redirect it back toward Tyranitar just inches before it could hit it. The dinosaur leaped to the side to dodge, and the errant Hyper Beam slammed into the ceiling. Stained glass shattered and chunks of marble toppled to the floor. A hideous crag split the ceiling, but the cavernous cathedral held.

Ivy pointed at Mr. Mime. "Burn it!"

Houndoom leaped forward with a howl and loosed a Flamethrower laced with tendrils of darkness. Mr. Mime threw up a Barrier and blocked the attack easily, but Houndoom kept going. Ivy herself took off at a sprint and threw her knife at Sabrina. Alakazam stopped it just before it could hit Sabrina, and the weapon clattered to the ground. Undeterred, Ivy produced another knife and threw it.

"Umbreon!"

Umbreon Double Teamed toward Alakazam and materialized inches away, but all of a sudden a silvery wave of Psychic energy slammed into it and sent the black feline flying. Umbreon crashed into a marble pillar and sank to the floor, twitching.

"No!" Ivy blinked back her tears and threw knife after knife at Sabrina, but Alakazam intercepted them all.

Houndoom, meanwhile, was still pummeling Mr. Mime's Barrier with its Flamethrower and wearing down the bipedal Psychic. Ivy backpedaled away from Alakazam before it could retaliate against her directly and glanced at Houndoom.

"Fire Blast!" she bit out.

Houndoom's fire turned from orange to blue, and Mr. Mime worked harder to maintain its Barrier. Hypno lumbered toward the dueling pair and swung its pendulum, but Tyranitar was ready to intervene.

"Knock it out!"

Tyranitar slammed into Hypno with a spinning Dragon Tail that sent the Psychic flying. Sabrina waved a hand and stopped Hypno's trajectory, though, and lowered it to the ground where it sank to all fours, reeling from the hit but okay. Ivy watched carefully as Alakazam stilled while Sabrina tapped into its power to catch Hypno, and an idea began to form.

She pointed at Alakazam. "Tyranitar, Crunch!"

Tyranitar roared and took off toward Alakazam, who stumbled backward in fear. A loud, shattering sound drew Ivy's attention, and she turned to see Houndoom breaking through Mr. Mime's Barrier and unleashing its scorching fire upon the humanoid mime itself. Umbreon, too, had managed to pick itself up and hobbled back toward Ivy. She bared her teeth in a grin, but a deep-throated growl drained her of any sense of accomplishment as she turned to see Hypno grappling with Tyranitar.

The jaundiced Psychic dug its three-fingered paws into Tyranitar's skull and pulsed with crimson energy. The green behemoth lost its balance and fell to all fours, blind to the world as Hypno drained its life force with a deadly Dream Eater attack.

All sense of time and space left Ivy as her limbs moved of their own accord, Umbreon hot on her tail. There were no tears blurring her vision, but she saw red. Red, like when that Raticate that had tried to crush Larvitar's skull in its oversized jaws so many years ago. She didn't even remember drawing the knife as her head echoed with Tyranitar's agonized wailing and Hypno siphoned off its life force.

She leaped at Hypno and drove her knife through its shoulder blades. The Psychic screeched but held tight. Ivy screamed and yanked her knife back again, but a chilling wave of silvery energy stayed her hand. Hypno writhed in pain and released Tyranitar, who crumpled to the ground and clutched its aching head. Ivy took the attack with a shudder and sat up as it petered out, but Hypno continued to writhe next to her. Dark, enervating energy entered the wound Ivy had made with her knife and coursed through its body with a mind of its own. It

found exits in Hypno's eyes, nose, mouth, and ears, and soon it created its own as it ripped the flesh from the inside out. Hypno smoked with stygian fire and finally fell still. Its pendulum rolled across the tiled floor a few inches away.

Umbreon stood next to where Ivy had fallen, smoking as though burned. Its yellow eyes were narrowed to slits and it emanated dark energy despite the noticeable limp in its front right leg and the bleeding cuts on its back.

"Umbreon," she said, incredulous.

"Die!"

Sabrina's voice rang out over the chaos. She had gathered the seven or eight knives Alakazam had stopped and levitated them with telekinesis. Ivy barely stood up before Sabrina fired them off all at once. Ivy raised her arms to shield her face and braced herself for the pain, but it never came. Gasping for breath, she peered beyond her crossed arms back at Sabrina. The knives still floated in midair, quaking slightly with the overload of Psychic energy controlling them.

"How *dare* you!" Sabrina shouted. "You betray your own kind for *this filth*?!"

Ivy caught her breath and turned to look over her shoulder. Gary stood at the mouth of the cathedral with Espeon, covered in old blood but still standing.

"Maybe I just like her personality."

His words spurred Ivy into action, and she jumped to grab one of the knives suspended in mid-air.

"Dark Pulse!"

Houndoom howled and exploded with dark energy that filled the room and drowned it in darkness. Ivy threw the knife just as Alakazam was buffeted by the powerful attack, and Sabrina opened her mouth to scream. She never made it.

The knife pierced her through the heart, and the golden glow around her instantly faded as she fell to the floor in an unceremonious heap. The rest of the knives clattered to the floor, and Ivy scooped one up and jogged to Sabrina's convulsing body.

She was bleeding in spurts from her chest, and her ghastly eyes had faded back to their natural, dark color. Blood bloomed upon Sabrina's white robes, but Ivy paid it no mind as she climbed on top of her. Despite her situation, Sabrina bared her teeth in a bloody smile.

"Aren't you going to finish me off?"

There were so many questions left, about Marco and about Team Rocket, even about Erika and what had driven Sabrina to choose this path, to throw away something beautiful for a throne no one could see and a crown drenched in the blood of the innocent. But there was no time, so she merely loomed over Sabrina and cupped her porcelain face in her bloodied hands, leaning in close so there was nowhere else for Sabrina to look.

"No. I just wanna watch you slip into darkness where mine'll be the last face you ever see."

Sabrina's eyes widened, and this close Ivy could see her own reflection in them. Shadows bled from her own eyes and blotted them out entirely, like thick tar spilling from abyssal depths with no end in sight. Sabrina choked on her own blood and spit as she gazed deeper, unable to look away and unable to call for help with her tongue rolled so far back in her throat.

Ivy smiled and dug her dirty nails into Sabrina's high cheekbones, drawing blood. Phantom tendrils leaked from the incisions she made and cloaked the air over the two of them in heavy shade. "What's the matter, Sabrina? Afraid of the dark?"

Sabrina shuddered under her, pretty face warped in a mask of abject terror all in total silence. With a final death rattle she fell still, eyes frozen open and reflecting only darkness.

Only the scraping sound of Tyranitar regaining consciousness and staggering to its hind legs filled the space. Houndoom was quietly feasting on Mr. Mime's roasted kidneys, and Slowbro had lost consciousness from its original wounds. Only Alakazam remained, hobbled by Umbreon's Dark Pulse and facing the beat up but scrappy feline in a staring contest whose end would instigate another bloody fight. Only now, Sabrina was no longer around to direct its Miracle Eye, and Alakazam dared not move.

Ivy stared down at Sabrina's etiolated face, gone cold with death's veil. She didn't even hear Gary and Espeon approach and stop just out of arm's reach.

"Ivy," he said softly.

Something in her snapped, and she drew the knife she'd picked up. In her bum hand, she gathered up Sabrina's thick hair in a tangled grip and brought the knife down, serrated edge first, over her neck.

Shloop, shloop, shloop.

Each back and forth across Sabrina's neck sawed deeper through the throat and tendons that gave it its slender but sturdy shape. The monotonous motions invigorated Ivy's hand and drove her on. She hit bone and fitted the edge of the knife in between two vertebrae to saw through the spinal cord. Blood so dark it was almost black spilled over the marble floor and soaked Ivy's right arm up to the elbow. It speckled her face and got in her eye, and she bent her head to wipe it clean on her shoulder.

With a final grunt of effort, Sabrina's head rolled free of her body and Ivy staggered to her feet. She held the severed head by the hair at her side and stared down at the body she'd mutilated at her feet. Tyranitar lumbered closer and sniffed at the body, but something foul reached its nose and it growled, repulsed.

"Ivy."

She shot a glance back at Gary and stiffened. His face was smeared with dried blood, sweat, and grime like he'd squeezed a heart until it exploded all over him. But she barely noticed his ghastly appearance and focused on his eyes, wide and unreadable as they stared back at her. There was nothing there, no flicker of recognition, no reflection or empathy.

Just like Sabrina.

She repressed a shiver, unable to hold his gaze for long as warmth swelled over her cheeks and forehead. The humidity was so thick and hot down here that her chest constricted for lack of air.

"Gary?"

He said nothing and remained still as a statue. He didn't even reach for her. "You killed her."

"You helped me."

His eyes fell to Sabrina's decapitated head dripping blood onto the

floor and splashing Ivy's armored calf. When his gaze flickered back to her face, she took a step back.

"Don't look at me like that. Not you."

He blinked and stepped forward. "That's not what I—"

He cut himself off and suddenly whipped around to face Alakazam, like he'd only just now noticed the Psychic was still standing. Ivy watched with trembling hands as he locked eyes with Alakazam but said nothing. Espeon slinked forward, hackles raised, and Umbreon hissed at its violet counterpart.

"Gary," Ivy said. "Hey."

He ignored her and continued his staring contest with Alakazam. The Psychic lowered its arms and rubbed the silver spoons between its three-fingered hands as it slowly stepped forward toward Gary and Espeon. Umbreon backed away toward Ivy, still hissing and crouched to attack.

"Gary," Ivy said a little more forcefully.

He held a hand out for Alakazam, and the tall Pokémon cocked its head toward Ivy and her small army of Dark Pokémon. Gary swept his arm toward them but kept his eyes firmly focused on Alakazam.

"Gary, seriously, that thing's loyal to Sabrina. Get away from it."

"No, he's not."

He pulled one of the Pokéballs from his belt and held it out for Alakazam. The Psychic sank to the floor and folded its arms and legs, eerily human-like, and closed its eyes. Without so much as a flinch, it disappeared into the empty Pokéball in a flash of red light.

"What the *hell're* you thinking?"

Gary finally turned back to Ivy, an annoyed glint in his eyes that she recognized. "He wanted to come with me. Said he's never seen another Delphi cross Sabrina or side with a Messor, and he wanted to understand why."

Ivy frowned. "You...talked to it? You can do that?"

"In a sense."

With the threat gone, Ivy swallowed and returned Umbreon to its Pokéball to rest. She patted the side of Tyranitar's head, where Hypno had drawn deep slashes into its armored hide with telekinesis. Tyranitar nudged her shoulder in the closest thing to affection the big dinosaur could muster, and it soon joined Umbreon back in its Pokéball. Only Houndoom remained, and it trotted to Ivy's side, panting and dripping blood and bits of entrail from its muzzle.

"I don't get it," Ivy said. "Where'd you get the empty Pokéball?"

Gary's lips thinned, and his eyes lost focus for a fleeting moment. "Golduck's dead."

Horror washed over Ivy's frame like a cold blast of air, and careless of the stench of death in this place and their part in it, she dropped Sabrina's head and closed the distance to Gary, where she threw her good arm around his neck. Eyes squeezed shut, she sucked in a shuddering breath.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry." She looked up and searched his eyes. "Gary, I'm so sorry."

He raised his arms to return her embrace, but let them drop at the last minute and averted his gaze. "Me, too."

She followed his line of sight to Sabrina's head. Like Tyranitar before it, Houndoom sniffed the discarded meat and curled its lips back in a snarl, unwilling to touch it. Ivy's gaze hardened.

"She got what was coming to her."

Ivy pulled away to retrieve the severed head, and Gary's hand brushed the wisps of hair at her neck, just barely missing her.

"Yeah," he said. "She did."

"Nauty, use Spike Cannon!" Lily shouted from Dodrio's back.

Omastar surfaced in the lakewater and receded into its barbed, ivory shell as it began to spin atop the water's surface faster and faster. A Rhydon that was busy trying to grapple with Steven's Aggron got hit hard in its flank with a blast of ivory spikes and a jet of water. Most of the barbs clinked harmlessly against its armored shell, but a few of them struck the softer skin exposed between plates of shale-like scales and drew blood. Rhydon roared in pain as its entire right flank was

soon drenched in blood and water, and Aggron had all the opportunity it needed to overpower the shorter monster. With a heave, it launched Rhydon high into the air with gleaming, metal claws. Steven's two Skarmory swooped in out of nowhere and hit the falling Rhydon with successive Steel Wings that sliced through its segmented hide like knives through butter and ripped open deep, weeping gashes in its belly and back. By the time the beast hit the ground, it was already dead.

"Superpower!" one of the Rocket Grunts shouted.

An enemy Machamp roared and slammed into Aggron as the steely behemoth recovered from the Seismic Toss attack, and they clashed in a test of strength. Machamp beat its meaty fists hard into Aggron's belly and dented the plated armor. Lily gasped at the beasts' brutality, but before she could even think of something to help Aggron, Metagross sailed over the water's surface, propelled by Psychic energy. Steven kept his distance as he eyed the many trainers and soldiers swarming the south side of the lake and trying to get to the other side.

"Meteor Mash!" he called.

Metagross launched into the air and spread its crab-like appendages. They glowed with silvery light and shone like tempered steel in the afternoon sun, and they came down on Machamp's back with an explosive crack. The Fighter collapsed to the ground and writhed where Metagross had impaled it four times over and shattered its spine and ribs. Oozing, liquid steel congealed at the four entry wounds and hardened in Machamp's innards and over its leathery skin, glittering. Aggron growled and turned to its next fight now that Metagross had come to its rescue, and its armored tail smacked into Machamp as it turned. The dead Fighter rolled over the lake's bank and slipped halfway into the water. The craters on its back filled with hardening steel.

"Blast these assholes!"

Ash's voice cut through the din, and his Blastoise and Venusaur fired off a Hydro Pump and Solar Beam at the Psychic Pokémon defending their masters. A wondrous wall of yellow light materialized out of nowhere and erected a shield in front of the Pokémon and their trainers, stopping the attacks.

"Keep it up!" Ash shouted as he ran toward the Safeguard.

Gengar's violet Aura surrounded him and expanded, elongating his

arms and giving him wicked, smoky horns. He jumped thirty feet in the air and slashed at the Safeguard with his Ghostly hands. A wide gash opened up in the barrier beneath him and set off a chain reaction. Blastoise's and Venusaur's attacks shattered the rest of the weakened Safeguard and powered through to the Pokémon and people hiding behind it. A Drowzee was completely incinerated where it stood by the Solar Beam, and Hydro Pump slammed into a Kadabra, who in turn slammed into two trainers behind it.

"Die!"

Dodrio squawked as a Rocket Grunt wielding a crossbow took aim for Lily and her bird protected her. The bolt slashed through Dodrio's right flank but passed through it cleanly. Lily held onto the pommel of her saddle for dear life as the three-headed dodo screeched and writhed in fury and pain.

"Drill Peck!" she screamed.

The Rocket's Poliwrath moved to protect its trainer and spewed a powerful jet of water at Lily and Dodrio, but the bird was bigger and far faster. Powerful hind legs shot Dodrio high into the air, and the bird rocketed down in an arc guided by its feathered tail against the wind. Narrowly missing Poliwrath's assault, Dodrio cleared a section of the lake and landed hard on the grassy shore in front of the five-foot frog. Its three heads, in an uncharacteristic display of cooperation, lunged for Poliwrath and tore into its translucent flesh with ravenous hunger. Poliwrath tried to fight back and squeezed one of Dodrio's necks with its moist fist, but Dodrio brought one of its taloned feet up and crushed Poliwrath's legs, pinning it to the ground. Lily slipped off the saddle just as Dodrio's middle head ripped out the frog's thick intestines and squawked in victory.

Pikachu squeaked on Lily's shoulder and leaped just as Poliwrath's trainer aimed his reloaded crossbow at Lily.

"Thunderbolt!"

The yellow rodent exploded like a popped light bulb and sent a bolt of lightning at the Rocket Grunt faster than the eye could see. He took the hit in his chest and convulsed. Lily looked away as his eyes fried in their sockets and melted. Welts bubbled upon his exposed skin and bled a milky pous that mixed with his blood.

He hit the ground with a thud, and Lily retrieved his crossbow. It was lightweight and painted black, titanium alloy and easy to handle.

She'd never shot one before, but she'd also never fallen out of a skyscraper or seen a Ghost until today. The Rocket Grunt had a short quiver filled with steel-tipped bolts strapped to his thigh, so she scavenged them, too.

"Lily, watch it!"

Without thinking, Lily whipped around and loosed the crossbow with a yelp. An Abra had Teleported just in front of her and lashed out with its claws, intending to rip her throat out. The bolt tore a gaping hole in its inflated head at such close range. Abra's body fell to the ground and lay still. Lily's hands shook, and fresh blood speckled her face and bangs. Squeaking at her side drew her attention, and Pikachu looked up at her.

"I'm okay, ChuChu," she said shakily. "I'm...okay."

Ash's Pikachu ran toward them and chittered angrily at the fallen Abra. Across the lake, Ash himself waved to her, and she waved back. Satisfied, he leaped high into the air again and prepared to attack a Slowbro that was giving Venusaur a hard time with its Psychic attacks.

The fighting was absolute chaos. Everywhere she looked, people and Pokémon burned, burst, and bled as they tore and scraped at each other. Steven was as calm as ever as he tailed Aggron and Metagross, systematically punching his way through trainers and soldiers once his Pokémon dealt with theirs. The two Skarmory overhead swooped in for aerial support and to claim the scraps Aggron and Metagross missed. Even Ash was holding his own against the Psychic trainers that worked together to redirect his Pokémon's attacks and thwart him at every turn. Gengar's Aura saved him from their telepathic torture and slashed through their mystical Barriers and Safeguards, cackling all the while.

Lily searched the lakewater for Kingdra and found the huge sea Dragon gliding just below the surface. She signaled for it as she scanned the fighting. Noticing how she was isolated from Ash and Steven, four Rocket Grunts converged on her with a pair of Nidoking and Nidoqueen. Gritting her teeth, she backed up toward the water's edge and fumbled with a new crossbow bolt.

"Megahorn!" one of the Grunts shouted.

Nidoking roared and charged forward. Lily's foot sank into the water and Kingdra reared up behind her.

"Scaly, the Nidoking!"

Kingdra jumped high over the water and whipped up a Twister that caught the water in its enchanted winds. Lily ducked down and grabbed both her and Ash's Pikachu to keep them from getting sucked into the vortex, which touched down on the land just in front of them and zoomed toward Nidoking. The hulking rodent crashed into it and roared as the Dragonswind ripped off entire scales to expose bleeding muscle underneath.

Ash's Charizard flew by overhead and unleashed a thick curtain of fire over a group of Psychics Ash was attempting to corner just as one of the Grunts attacking Lily ordered Nidoqueen to help Nidoking.

"Earth Power!"

Nidoqueen slammed her thick fists into the earth and raised a wave of rocks and mud that hurtled toward Kingdra and caught it as it fell back into the water.

"No!" Lily said as her Dragon took the hit and landed with a giant splash in the now muddy lakewater.

Nidoking recovered from the Twister and was bleeding and limping, but it staggered forward with renewed conviction toward Lily.

"Dody!"

One of Dodrio's heads looked up from the Poliwrath it had been feasting on, now totally unrecognizable, and squawked. The other two heads stopped eating and they moved on their shared legs with blinding speed toward Nidoking, Body Slamming it to the ground. But Nidoqueen aimed her poisoned horn at Lily and growled.

The two Pikachu at Lily's feet sparked, but their lightning would not stop a Ground-type like Nidoqueen. Ash's Charizard made another loop overhead and drew her attention.

"Charizard!" she shouted up at it. "I need your help!"

The orange lizard trained its feral eyes on Lily and touched down. It bared its teeth in a snarl at the unfamiliar human before it despite Pikachu's presence and frantic squeaking. Nidoqueen roared and charged, head down and aiming to kill.

"Please! Use Fire Blast!"

Charizard leaked black, putrid smoke from its nostrils and lumbered down on all fours in front of Lily and the two Pikachu just as Nidoqueen was upon them and spat out a molten bolt of blue fire. Lily shielded her face from the overwhelming heat and stumbled backward into the water.

Nidoqueen screeched as her hardened skin melted off her bones, and Charizard jumped forward to tackle her. The two Pokémon crashed to the ground, and Charizard bit down on Nidoqueen's poisoned horn. It yanked back its head and tore off the upper half of her mouth and nose. Wings spread, it spat out the hunk of bone and roared.

"Shit, that thing's a monster!" one of the Grunts said.

"Let's get outta here!"

"ChuChu, Thunderbolt!" Lily pointed at the four Grunts who'd attacked her.

Her Pikachu was quick to obey and zipped forward, sparking. Ash's Pikachu chased after it, and together they delivered a double Thunderbolt attack that caught up to the fleeing Rocket Grunts and scorched the grass under their feet. They went up in fumes and smoke as the lightning short-circuited their bodies and brains, an almost instant death that hardly allowed for so much as a scream.

A sudden, low booming sound came from Wall Pythia, and the fighting paused as everyone turned to see a truly massive Steelix burst through among the falling rocks. It was followed by an Onix streaked with ghastly veins of super-hardened ruby along its body, and the two rock snakes roared so loud Lily had to cover her ears and squeeze her eyes shut. Omastar floated to the water's edge and crawled out on its spider-like legs, feeling for Lily with its blue tentacles.

"Fall back!" someone shouted.

A woman in black and green armor appeared at the southern gate to the garden tailed by a towering Exeggutor. Her face was streaked with shallow cuts and bloody, but her dark eyes showed no fear or remorse as she scanned the garden massacre.

More women in similar armor appeared with spears and swords, all showing signs of fatigue and struggle but ready to act as soon as their leader gave the command.

"Team Rocket," the woman with the Exeggutor said. "I am Erika, Gym

Leader of Celadon City and your last hope for survival. Your walls have fallen, and your stolen city is burning. You're beaten, so surrender and I'll spare your lives."

"You think you can challenge Sabrina?" one of the Psychic trainers said. "You'll never take Saffron so long as she lives!"

More trainers and soldiers poured into the garden and lingered outside its gates in all kinds of uniforms and armor. Some bore the Vermilion crest, others the Pewter or Cerulean crest, and still others Lily didn't recognize at all. She turned to where Ash stood with Blastoise and Venusaur clutching a wound on his thigh.

Did you bring all these people here?

"You can't defeat Team Rocket!" one of the Grunts riding a Tauros said. "Cut off one head, and three more grow back!"

"Your boss here is dead." Steven's soft but piercing voice cut through the vast garden and reached the invaders' ears. "Your lab is destroyed. I saw to it myself."

Erika walked forward, gaze hard. "Steven Stone. I don't know what the Champion of Hoenn could possibly be doing here." She paused and addressed the Rocket Grunts. "But if I were all of you, I would take his word seriously. You have no one left here to save you."

The Rockets began whispering among themselves, but the Psychic trainers advanced on Erika.

"Gym Leader Erika," one of them said, a Slowbro at his side. "You illegally invaded this city and declared martial law on its innocent citizens. What you've done is unforgivable, and the Elite Four won't stand for it. The Delphi won't stand for it."

"The Delphi won't be standing for anything ever again," said a familiar voice before Erika could respond to that.

Lily's jaw dropped as Ivy and a boy she didn't recognize Teleported in between the Rockets, the Psychic trainers, and Erika's invaders. A lean Alakazam stood between them. Ivy threw something at Erika, and it rolled to her feet.

"As promised," Ivy said.

Silence befell the crowd as Erika kneeled down and picked up the

round object Ivy had tossed at her. Her jaw clenched and unclenched as she examined the pale face, a turbulent mix of emotions flashing in her dark eyes. But the moment passed, and Lily covered her mouth in horror as Erika lifted the severed head by the hair and held it out for everyone to see.

"Your Delphi, ladies and gentlemen."

Slowly, the Rockets and Psychic trainers dropped their weapons. Swords, knives, and crossbows clattered to the ground followed by their bearers who sank to their knees. One of Erika's warriors turned back to the invaders and waved.

"Sabrina is dead! Silph is liberated! We've won!"

Cheers erupted and beat down on the defeated Rockets and Psychic trainers. The symphony of victorious whoops and huzzahs was almost as deafening as Steelix's mighty roar. Omastar and Pikachu huddled around Lily, and Kingdra, recovered from the earlier beating it had taken at Nidoqueen's hands, surfaced just behind them among frothing bubbles.

Steven caught her eye, and perhaps it was her exhaustion catching up with her, but she could have sworn he smiled at her. Lily picked up her Pikachu and hugged the little rodent close, and she breathed.

Six translucent wings thirty feet across from tip to tip beat the night air so fast that they were almost as invisible as they were silent. Only the Bug's rattling breath gave away its presence as it touched down on the grass. Jessie dismounted and ducked under the Bug's wings to pat its frons between two bulging, compound eyes that reflected her face a thousand times over.

"Good job, Yanmega," she said, smirking. "I do believe that was quietest exit I've ever made."

Yanmega clicked its six-inch fangs together and lowered its head as she scratched it.

"Hwoorrgh!"

Jessie rolled her eyes. "If you can't take Yanmega's smooth flying, there's no hope for you at all."

Her flying companion wiped his mouth and leaned on his knees for

support while he caught his breath. "I don't get out much, and definitely not like that."

Han righted himself and smoothed out his lab coat before unstrapping the leather satchel buckled to Yanmega's saddle. He slung it over his shoulder, and Jessie recalled the giant Bug to its Pokéball.

"I'll take that." Jessie snatched the satchel from Han before he could stop her, and he swore.

"That's *mine*."

He made a swipe for it, but Jessie pulled a knife on him and yanked him down by the collar. She pressed the blade to the crook of his neck and held his gaze just inches from her own.

"It's the Boss's," she said in a low, murderous tone. "And don't forget that you're only here to corroborate my story."

Han swallowed hard but didn't back down. "None of this would be possible without me. My brother died in Saffron—"

"And so did my partner." Jessie pressed the knife into his skin just enough to draw blood, and Han whimpered. She bared her teeth at his weakness and shoved him away, unable to bear the stench of him. "So don't you fucking cry to me." She sheathed her knife and headed for the double metal doors hammered into the side of the mountain face. "Not today."

Han shivered in the cold and dutifully followed without another word, unwilling to get left behind. Jessie approached the double doors and punched a button embedded in the rock. A few moments later, an eye slot opened and someone peered out at her. She said nothing, but the person on the other side opened the door for her. Without waiting for Han, Jessie entered the mountain hideout.

"Welcome back, Jessie." The guard manning the door saluted her, and Jessie nodded in acknowledgment. Her eyes lingered on the red 'R' emblazoned on his left breast.

Han tailed her inside, and soon stone gave way to metal. Their boots clicked against the brown grating as the cave opened up into a large cavern hollowed out and rebuilt as a laboratory. Scientists below worked on all kinds of projects, from gene splicing to Pokémon dissection. Rocket Grunts with Machoke, Ursaring, and Quagsire patrolled the grounds on duty. Jessie went for the elevator at the end

of the metal walkway, foregoing the stairs, and Han followed.

"He's here?" he asked.

"Obviously."

She pressed the elevator button, and after a minute or two the doors opened with a ding. As she and Han descended, she put her hands on her hips and glared at him askance.

"Let me do the talking. You'll just fuck us both over."

Han frowned but kept his distance. "Don't forget that this is to help us both. My brother and I planned to cut out Santos from the beginning, and now you'll probably get promoted for helping me get here."

"I know what I said, but you're a goddamned mess. If you start talking, the Boss could get the wrong impression and think the whole mission was a failure."

"But...it was. Silph's lost, and so is Saffron."

Jessie sighed in frustration. "Which is *exactly* why *I'm* gonna tell the story. Or do you *want* to die today?"

Han shut up, and the elevator dinged again. Jessie tucked her bangs behind her ear and strutted into the spacious room with her head held high. This deep in the mountain below the Ice Path, there were no windows or natural light. Electric wall sconces offered subtle lighting and cast dancing shadows over the navy, stone walls. Fur rugs cut from Arcanine pelts covered the stone floors and insulated the room. A fire burned in a hearth some five or six feet long carved out of the far wall. The office was otherwise sparsely decorated with a wide, oaken desk, a few chairs, and a modest sitting area around a wooden coffee table.

Jessie had to catch herself before she cursed aloud when a Persian, who had been snoozing on one of the Arcanine skins, looked up and growled. Two people looked up from a stretcher that had been wheeled in, and Jessie immediately sank down to one knee and crossed her fisted arm over her chest, head bowed.

"Boss," she said. "I apologize for the intrusion at this late hour, but this can't wait."

The shorter of the two people, a tall, redheaded woman in heeled,

leather boots and a white fur coat stepped forward. "As a matter of fact, you were just interrupting."

"Ma'am, please excuse the interruption. Like I said, this can't wait."

"It's fine, Ariana," a man's voice said. "Jessie is one of our best agents in Kanto. I'm *sure* she has a very good reason for disturbing me at such a critical moment."

The warning in his mellifluous tone sent a violent shiver of fear down Jessie's spine, and she gritted her teeth. He hovered just behind Ariana, hands in his pockets and dressed in a pressed, black suit.

"Sir, I have the artifact Archer commissioned Silph to recreate." Jessie slung the leather satchel off her shoulder and held it up to the man.

She stole a glance back at Han to find that he'd prostrated himself in a similar manner to her, but he was visibly shaking and his thick, black hair was plastered to his forehead.

"Not that I'm not thrilled to receive the finished product, but why are *you* here? Where is Archer?"

Jessie chose her next words very carefully. "Sir, Archer's dead, along with my partner, James, and countless other Rocket Agents. They died in the invasion of Saffron."

Ariana gasped. "*What* did you just say, girl?"

"There was an invasion. From what I could tell, it was a coordinated attack by Pewter, Cerulean, Vermilion, and Lavender led by Celadon to assassinate Sabrina and liberate Silph." Jessie bit her lip and continued to stare at the floor. "Archer was murdered with most of the other scientists in a direct assault on the Chimera labs."

Small but strong hands yanked Jessie up by the collar, and she came face to face with Ariana's blazing eyes. "Come *again*?"

Jessie fought every urge in her body to lash out and remained limp and pliant in Ariana's grip. "We've lost Saffron, ma'am."

"Giovanni," Ariana said. "If this is true, we have to do something. Since when do Vermilion and Cerulean cooperate? Since when does Celadon cooperate with *anyone*?"

Giovanni ran a hand over his clean-shaven, square jaw and narrowed

bright, grey eyes. "First Goldenrod, and now Saffron." He shook his head, thoughts still racing. "I was so distracted by what they were doing in Johto that I failed to see the same warning signs in Kanto."

Silence befell the group save for Han's short breaths.

"You're damn right you've been distracted," Ariana spat. "Well, I suppose we can't have our cake and eat it, too. I *so* hope it was worth it." She gestured at the stretcher behind Giovanni, but Jessie couldn't make out whoever was passed out on it.

"You said they were organized," Giovanni addressed Jessie again. "How?"

"I'm not sure, Boss." She paused and narrowed her eyes. "Although, this all began when I ran into those three."

"Three? Who?"

"Three brats. One was a former Admin of ours."

"What? Who?" Ariana demanded.

"A woman. Ivy something or other."

Ariana narrowed her eyes to feral slits and bared her teeth. "So the rumors are true. She survived, too."

"Um, excuse me," Han said, walking forward. "But there is a silver lining here."

Persian got to its feet and stretched languidly. The big cat rubbed its golden head against Giovanni's hip, looking for a free pat. All eyes turned to the quaking scientist, and Jessie shot him a venomous look that promised cruel and unusual punishment if he screwed this up.

"Oh, really? And who the hell're you?" Ariana said.

"I'm the person who's responsible for bringing you that, finished and in mint condition." Han indicated the satchel Giovanni still held. "And I can guarantee it's the genuine article. Losing Saffron is a hard blow, but that more than makes up for it."

"Do you, now? And will you also stake your life on that guarantee? Because it's been a few days since I last killed someone, and you're just my type." Ariana produced a Pokéball from her sleeve and rolled it around in her hand.

Giovanni removed a glass and steel canister from the satchel and examined its contents. Inside lay a single, silver feather tipped with black darker than the night sky. It pulsated with a faint but palpable force, like a heartbeat all its own. "The Silver Wing," he said, awed. "I didn't think it was possible, but here it is."

"Steven Stone tried to steal it," Jessie said.

Giovanni snapped his eyes back to her. "Steven Stone? Are you absolutely certain?"

Jessie nodded. "Yes, sir. I'm sure."

"Steven Stone," Ariana mulled. "He's the one who killed Archer, isn't he?" She growled low in the back of her throat. "Damnit! Giovanni, this is an unmitigated disaster. Are you going to listen to me *now*, finally? We have to do *something*. I've lost enough men and resources in Johto over this past year to know when we're nearing the eleventh hour. I say we take Saffron back now, while the invaders are weak and weary."

Giovanni shook his head and continued to stare at the Silver Wing. "No. Saffron's gone, that's that. We have Fuchsia still, and in the meantime, there are other avenues I've been paving for us. Team Rocket will come out of this like we always do. This is the eleventh hour, true enough, but it's also the moment of truth. *Our* moment. This is exactly what we've been waiting for, a chance to repaint this corrupted land in our image, to rise from the ashes reborn. It's just as they predicted..."

Ariana said nothing as she continued to glare at Giovanni, and Jessie looked between them, unsure what was going on but not stupid enough to ask.

"Jessie, you did the right thing coming here." Giovanni returned the Silver Wing to its satchel again. "We'll make our move once I deliver the Silver Wing, as promised. Ariana, tell Proton and Petrel to get their teams ready. We sail for Cinnabar as soon as I return."

Ariana pressed her lips together. "Whatever you say, *Boss*."

She headed for the elevator in a huff.

"Jessie."

Jessie stood to attention. "Sir."

Giovanni stepped forward and loomed over her. He was a tall man, broad-shouldered and built to last despite his greying hair and the crows' feet around his silver eyes. "I trust you to tie up all the loose ends."

She bowed stiffly. "Consider it done."

She turned away and jerked her head for Han to follow.

"Wait, is that it? I thought I'd get a promotion or—"

"Shut up," she hissed as she punched the elevator button.

Giovanni watched them enter the elevator, first Han and then Jessie. The glint of steel caught his eye as she pulled a knife and disappeared behind the closed elevator doors, and he turned away, satisfied. Persian purred as it rubbed up against him, and he scratched the big cat behind the ears.

Alone again, he went to his desk and gently set the canister holding the Silver Wing down. Then he picked up a heavy, glass paperweight and threw it with all his might at the wall. It ricocheted off a wall sconce, and the light flickered and sparked before sputtering out completely.

"God*damnit*!"

Giovanni breathed through his nose and shook with otherworldly rage in silence. Persian watched him with yellow eyes, unblinking and devoid of empathy. It took him several minutes to calm down, and he walked back to the stretcher he'd been leaning over before Jessie walked in and dropped a bomb on him. All those plans, all the years of careful plotting and infecting the Old Continent and the New from the inside out, all down the drain. And all because of a few punks who decided they wanted to try their hand at playing hero.

All because of *him*.

Giovanni leaned his hands on the stretcher and glared down at the sleeping youth, still bruised from the fight he'd put up back at the Lake of Rage. His arm was wrapped up in a cast and a deep gash bisected his forehead, stitched together with thick, black twine. His shoulder-length, red hair was washed and tied back in a low ponytail to keep it out of his healing wounds.

"I'm doing this for you," Giovanni said through gritted teeth. "And

you'll see. In the end, they always see. I've come too far to let it fall apart now, so if I have to make a deal with the devil himself, I'll do it. He wouldn't have made it this far without me."

The young man on the stretcher breathed deeply in his sleep, eyes mercifully closed to the physical pain that weighed his body down after the grueling fight he and his friends had put up at the Lake of Rage last week. But he was here now, and here he would stay.

"In the end, they always see. Marco..." His breath hitched in his throat as he let his words slip past greedy lips, precious. "My son." He laid a hand over Marco's eyes, grey and piercing just like his. "In the end, you'll see it my way. I promise you that."

17. Saffron City, Part 4

Triumvirate, chapter 17: Saffron City, Part 4
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

The Siege of Saffron left a broken city in the invaders' laps to clean up and rebuild. When news of Sabrina's downfall and Team Rocket's ejection from Silph spread among the citizens, panic nearly ensued. But in a display of great leadership and resilience despite his recent confinement and abuse, Dojo Master Itosu Anko assumed control of Saffron and put his trainers to work at the hospitals and running food stations. With the invaders' assistance in numbers, he succeeded in curbing widespread hysteria on the verge of pandemonium as Saffron's citizens turned their attentions to taking care of themselves and each other.

Hospitals were overflowing with the injured and the dying, and the Pokémon Center was equally stuffed to the point of bursting. But everyone worked together to help their needy and called in reinforcements from the surrounding cities that had remained at the edges of Saffron until the fighting ceased. Support arrived from Vermilion and Celadon, and it brought nurses, doctors, and other Pokémon health professionals and volunteers to deal with the aftermath of the war's carnage.

After reuniting with Gary and Ivy in the garden, Ash learned Lily's true identity and witnessed the heartfelt reunion between Ivy and her.

"See? You promised me we'd see each other again, and we did," Lily said as she held Ivy's hands in hers.

Ivy smiled and wiped her nose with the sleeve of her armor. "Yeah, I guess I did, didn't I? You really are a lifesaver."

"Wait, you're *that* Lily? As in, the badass supernerd who revived Gary's Aerodactyl?" Ash blurted out.

"Huh? Gary has an Aerodactyl? But that's impossible. The only specimens alive are kept in my lab in Cinnabar."

Ivy forced a laugh. "Yeah, about that..."

"She stole one of the eggs when she was there," Gary deadpanned. "It hatched."

"You *what*?!" Lily covered her mouth in shock.

"Traitor," Ivy said between gritted teeth to Gary.

"You mean, you actually *hatched* an Aerodactyl? And it's healthy? Oh my god, show me!"

Ash looked in between the two girls. "You mean, you don't care that she stole the egg?"

"Who's got time to worry about some boring old egg when there's a *real life* Aerodactyl among us?!"

Gary released the flying reptile, and Lily could hardly contain herself as she inspected it, nearly in tears and ignoring her injuries as excitement took over. Aerodactyl sniffed her curiously but remained docile after a silent command from Gary.

"Oh my god, this is *incredible*! He's much bigger than I thought he'd be! Can I touch him? Ooh! Can I take some scale samples? Oh, just *wait* til my colleagues back at the lab hear about this!"

But the reunion was short-lived for the moment as the Siege's aftermath required anyone who could still stand upright to pitch in and secure the wounded. Ash tied a cloth tourniquet around his wounded thigh and was on his feet for the rest of the day and well into the night just helping locate and dig out survivors from the rubble with Butterfree's Supersonic waves and Snorlax's strength. The lumbering bear and the delicate Bug made for an odd couple, but they worked well together and managed to recover some fifty or so wounded and buried people and Pokémon.

But when Ash himself finally made it to the hospital to check up on Ivy, Lily, and others receiving treatment, he ran into Violet in the hall, who looked like she'd had as rough a night as he had.

"Ash," she said, voice raspy. "What're you doing up? You should be resting."

"I could say the same to you."

The hospital in the western part of Dodona District was filled to capacity, and the Public Library next door had been taken over to make more room for the injured while still others were taken to the smaller clinic on the east side. Pasty, blue walls meant to offer a soothing atmosphere now only appeared washed out and monotonous

after all the blood and gore Ash had witnessed both in battle and after. Nurses rushed about seeing to patients and paid Ash and Violet little mind.

"Yeah." Violet lowered her eyes and managed a sad smile. "It's been a rough time for me."

Ash frowned, and Pikachu squeaked on his shoulder. Gengar remained dormant within him, exhausted from the fighting. "Hey, what happened? Don't tell me someone died."

When she didn't answer, his attempt to lighten the mood a bit fell flat and the blood drained from his face.

"Violet? Where's Misty?"

When she looked up at him again, tears filled her eyes. Before she could, however, Ash sprinted past her to the door through which she'd emerged.

"Misty!"

The tiny hospital room was dark, and only the light of the coming dawn offered any illumination. There was evidence of people having come and gone—rumpled blankets, crushed soda cans in the trash, and a few empty chairs. A single cot hooked up to a couple monitors and complex machinery Ash could not hope to identify sat with its head pushed against the back wall near a window. He rushed to the side, but something stopped his progress. A squat rodent as tall as his waist sparked in warning, dark eyes narrowed. Pikachu jumped off Ash's shoulder and began to crackle with static electricity as it faced down the potential threat.

"Raichu?" Ash said.

"Ash." Violet appeared in the doorway. "Misty's okay, don't worry."

He looked back toward the cot and squinted through the gloom at the bandaged head resting motionless on the pillow. "Then who...?"

Violet closed the distance to him and put a hand out toward Raichu. The large rodent didn't back off, but its static electricity died down. "It's okay, Raichu. You remember these guys."

Pikachu approached its larger evolutionary form and gave it a sniff. Raichu sat back on its haunches, somewhat appeased as it recognized

Pikachu and Ash. Violet moved to the head of the bed and laid a hand on the patient's head.

"Surge redirected about seventy Thunderbolts to give Steelix and Onix an opening in Wall Pythia. He saved a lot of lives, and we probably wouldn't have made it through to Pythia District if it wasn't for him." She paused and took a steadying breath. "But it was too much electricity for him to handle, even with his Pokémon helping him. The doctors say he's in critical condition. They don't know if he's gonna make it."

Ash approached the cot and leaned over Surge. His vision blurred with unshed tears as he searched the patches of visible skin on Surge's face. Angry welts pebbled the bandages holding him together, and his eyes were closed. His breathing made a soft, rattling sound through the respirator someone had hooked him up to.

"No," Ash said, voice cracking. He searched for Surge's hand and held it in his own. "Damnit, no!"

He squeezed Surge's hand, but there was no response. Raichu and Pikachu leaped up on the bed and waddle to the head, where Raichu nudged Surge's chest with its moist nose and curled up under his limp arm.

Ash blinked, and a few stray tears fell. "Surge, you piece of shit. Tryna play hero like you're all cool." He sniffled and wiped his eyes. "You better wake up soon so I can kick your ass, old man."

Violet watched in silence, fresh tears welling in her eyes as she covered her mouth to stifle a sniffle. Ash looked up at her and blinked away his tears.

"He's gonna be okay," he said softly. "Wait and see."

"I couldn't bear it," Violet stammered. "Not after—" She choked on a sob and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Violet." Ash reached for her, but she hugged herself.

"Daisy's dead. We went to the Dojo to free the Bellator, and she... There were Psychics there and she just—" Another sob cut off her words, and Ash could only stare at this no-nonsense, tough woman he'd gotten to know over the past year reduced to quaking sniffles and weeping. "Misty couldn't handle it. She's still out there." Violet wiped her nose with a tissue and sighed.

"Shit," Ash said, totally deflated. "Daisy's..." He clenched his fists and shook with anger and despair. Surge's rattling, automated breathing filled the room, and he looked away. "Violet, I can't even say how sorry I am." He pulled off his hat and gripped his hair hard enough to hurt. "Aw, fuck. I gotta find Misty. I have to talk to her."

"I wouldn't bother. She's out there helping, and she was pretty clear that she wanted to be alone." She composed herself some more and fixed Ash with as hard a stare as she could. "Please, you need to rest."

"While Misty's still out there? No way."

"You can barely stay standing. Look at you, you're shaking and you can barely keep your eyes open."

He opened his mouth to protest, but a dizzy spell cut him off. Blinking, he stared down at his hands, which shook and twitched of their own accord. "How can I rest when you and Misty're in so much pain?"

She reached over Surge's unmoving body and laid a hand on Ash's shoulder. Despite the gravity of the situation, she managed a sad smile. "Because if you don't, she'll be in even more pain knowing someone else she loves is running himself bare."

Ash averted his gaze. "Right."

Violet let him go and stood up straight again.

"What about you?"

Her gaze fell back to Surge. "I'm still awake. I'd like to stay with him a little longer, in case anything changes. Sandra and the other Vermilion soldiers are helping the Dojo trainers, so..."

"Right. Okay. I'll be back after I've had a few hours' sleep."

Ash scooped up Pikachu and cast one last look back at Surge and his Raichu, so small and frail looking wrapped up in white. Violet ran a gentle hand over Surge's blistering cheek and closed her eyes. Unwilling to intrude any longer, Ash ducked back out into the hall and steadied himself on the wall with on hand. He thought about Misty, how she must be feeling in the wake of losing a sister. His thoughts shifted to his mother, how he'd clutched her body to him in the destruction of Pallet Town. The idea of losing her forever... He couldn't bear it.

His thigh was throbbing after all the hours of exertion, so he headed for the front of the hospital to see about getting some antibiotics and proper bandages. Gengar's Aura had shielded him from most of the war's peril, but the Ghost was completely spent as a result and Ash was running on fumes. Not bothering to disturb the nurses and doctors who had more pressing matters to worry about, Ash rummaged around a cabinet in the hospital's pharmacy ward and patched himself up enough to stave off the threat of infection.

He hissed when the iodine touched his slashed skin. The edges of the wound had yellowed with exposure and wear, and he was sure he would need stitches. A lot of them. Rewrapping his thigh, he headed for the inpatient ward in search of familiar faces. The halls blended together in a pasty, blue oblivion, and Ash barely noticed where he was going as his legs carried him. Each step was harder than the last as exhaustion caught up with him. The rooms were filled to capacity and beyond where hospital staff had wheeled in extra cots and even sleeping bags and folded blankets to accommodate the wounded. But toward the back, Erika had cordoned off a small section of the ward for her people and invited Ash and his friends to recover there in light of their contribution to her cause.

He reached for the knob, but it opened of its own accord just before he could make contact. Espeon stood on the other side of the door and looked up at Ash curiously. Pikachu squeaked and leaped down onto the floor to stand next to it, but the violet feline ignored it and trotted back to Gary, who was leaning against the wall.

"Took you long enough to get here," Gary said softly so as not to wake the sleeping women in two of the room's three cots.

Ivy and Lily were passed out cold and wrapped up in all manner of bandages while Hyper Potions fed them each via intravenous tubes. Wigglytuff and Pikachu were curled up in between them and sleeping, though Wigglytuff's large ears twitched at the boys' conversation, belying its langor.

"Whoa," Ash said. "Didn't think Ivy would be passed out. She never sleeps."

Gary's messy bangs hid his eyes as he averted his gaze to the floor. "The fight with Sabrina took a lot out of her."

Ash looked between the two girls and missed Gary's evasive maneuver, too tired to think straight. "Small world, huh? Can't believe

we ran into Lily. Looks like Team Rocket really put her through the ringer."

He narrowed his eyes at the thought, and not for the first time wondered why exactly she'd been at Silph with the Champion of Hoenn, no less.

"I wanna know what she was doing at Silph, too," Gary said. He put up a hand as Ash glanced at him. "That was a guess. You know I can't read your mind."

"Right. But I bet Alakazam could."

Gary shifted and crossed his arms across his chest. Espeon rubbed up against his leg and purred softly. "I'm not sure what Alakazam's capable of. After seeing how Sabrina acted, what she could do..." He shook his head. "I dunno."

Ash stumbled toward the empty cot and sat down on it. Pikachu hopped up next to him and kneaded the scratchy but mercifully clean mattress. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure you'll figure it out. You're still the same old douchebag I know and love. Nothing's gonna change that."

Gary didn't even react to the playful jab, lost in thought. Espeon looked up at him and swished its tail through the air. Ash sighed and laid back on the bed, kicking off his boots but not bothering with the rest of his armor.

"You're hurt," Gary said, approaching.

"Dude, you're seriously gonna nag me about shit *now*?"

Gary surveyed the damage and started to unclip Ash's greaves without asking.

"Hey! Watch the goods."

"Shut up. You need stitches."

Grumbling, Ash reluctantly tugged at the rest of his lightweight armor and set it on the floor. His favorite red jacket and a pair of cargo pants, now slashed up where his wound was, clung to his skin and hid so many bruises that they had blended together into one amorphous, purple splotch on his back. Gary set to work with a needle and thread, but in his exhaustion Ash barely felt the pricks.

"You saw Surge," Gary said after a while.

It took Ash a moment to respond as his head clouded with soporific aching. "Yeah."

"I saw what he did. It was incredible. He toppled about seventy Magnemite all fused together in one go. Courtesy of Chimera, of course."

"Sounds like Surge, whoopin' ass and getting himself almost killed before he can take names."

Gary looped the black stitching thread through Ash's leg and slowly pushed the skin back together. "Ash, I'm—"

"Daisy's dead," Ash interrupted, rubbing his eyes. "Violet told me."

"...Shit, seriously?" Gary paused his sewing. "Oh, fuck."

"What?"

"I was supposed to go to the Dojo with them. Damnit, they must've gone without me, and then Daisy—"

"Hey, you didn't kill her. It's not your fault."

Gary searched Ash's eyes. "What about Misty?"

"I haven't seen her yet. Violet said she's taking it pretty hard."

"No shit."

He finished stitching Ash up in silence, and Ash lay back again.

"You know," Ash said softly as sleep crept over him like the rising tide. "I hope it was worth it. All this... I hope it makes a difference."

He couldn't see Gary as he closed his eyes and Pikachu settled on his chest. His oldest friend and rival stood up at his bedside and looked down on him, gaze far away.

"I hope so, too."

Ash was out before Gary could even finish his sentence.

Over the next several days, Saffron slowly recovered from the

invasion. Roads were cleared of debris thanks to the Dojo trainers' hardy Fighters, those with more minor wounds checked out of the hospitals and made room for those in need of more hands-on care, and Anko continued to head the rehabilitation of Saffron. With Sabrina dead and her remaining Psychic trainers incarcerated alongside their Team Rocket allies, the Dojo trainers reclaimed their position in Saffron. Gordon personally oversaw the reconstruction and rebuilding around the breached walls and piloted one of Silph's cranes alongside his engineers.

Gary found himself busier now than he'd been during the actual fighting as his bulkier Pokémon assisted in the rebuilding efforts. Slowly, the people of Saffron emerged from their hiding and learned of the invaders' victory. Gary was shocked to learn that they were so insulated behind their walls that there was no news here of Team Rocket's nefarious deeds across the continent. The organization had been nothing more than an investor in Silph to the masses, and as long as they were fed and protected, they hadn't put up much of a fuss. Those who did ended up like the massacred Dojo trainers. News of Sabrina's downfall was met with more enthusiasm, and people openly praised the Dojo trainers for their stolid bravery and leadership in the crisis. The road to recovery would be a long one, but with the Dojo back in power as Saffron's Gym, there was at least a clear path ahead.

Ivy slept for two full days, and Gary checked on her regularly. Her injuries had been far worse than she'd let on, with her entire left shoulder shattered from the Hitmonlee's High Jump Kick and held together only by her tight armor, as well as numerous smaller wounds she'd picked up in the charge to Pythia District. The fight with Sabrina, however, had drained her almost completely. As he observed her recovery, Gary wondered what it was about Clairvoyants and Reapers that rendered Ivy so totally helpless and spent after her confrontation with Sabrina.

"*What the matter, Sabrina? Afraid of the dark?"*

Gary rubbed his lips to get the imaginary tingle out as he watched her sleeping. Wigglytuff yawned and scratched behind its ear with a long foot. It paused to look up at Gary and blinked its large, indigo eyes.

"*Don't look at me like that. Not you."*

Gary leaned down at the cot's edge and gripped his head in his hands. The ache had faded over time, but it was still there, lingering like a cancer and a reminder of what he'd done, what he'd seen. Ivy shifted

in her sleep and nudged his elbow with the back of her hand. He lowered his hand to hers and traced her fingers.

"I don't know. I just don't know," he whispered.

"You'll figure it out."

He snapped to attention and found Ivy looking right at him through half-lidded eyes, still that same, bright blue that could cut through the dark.

"You're awake."

"Unless I'm dreaming." She paused and smiled tiredly. "Nope, you're wearing clothes and I hurt like hell. Definitely not a dream." She paused when he didn't respond and added, "My Pokémon."

"They're okay. I took Tyranitar, Umbreon, and Batty to the Pokémon Center. They're pretty backed up, but Nurse Joy said she'd take care of them."

Wigglytuff hopped onto Ivy's belly and got in her face, nose twitching. Ivy petted the pink rabbit and laughed a little. "Hey, girl. I'm surprised you didn't chew a hole through the blanket."

"Wigglytuff didn't leave your side the whole time you were sleeping."

"Huh. I guess I can't be all that bad if I can get a cute, pink rabbit to like me."

Silence befell them as Ivy's words hung in the air between them. The window was open and a warm, afternoon breeze blew in. There was a din of construction in the distance where work was being done to start Wall Pythia's repairs.

"Ivy," Gary began.

"But it's over now, so everything's gonna be okay. Right, Wigglytuff?"

Gary looked down at their hands, lightly touching. "It's not that simple."

She closed her hand around his and caught his eye. "You trusted me with taking her out, and she got what she deserved. You said it yourself."

"I know what I said. But..." He pressed his lips together as images of

Sabrina's severed head, of Ivy sawing it off, of Ivy leaning over her dying body and laughing returned to him. "But I just don't know what to think anymore."

"Gary... You don't think I would ever do that to you or anyone else who didn't have it coming. You trust me with everything, remember?"

"Yeah, I do, but I just... Look, she was like me, a Delphi. And Agatha said—"

"What Agatha said doesn't matter. *You* convinced me of that."

They stared at each other, neither backing down. Gary pulled his hand free and stuffed his fists in his jean pockets. "Maybe it does matter. Maybe there's some things that we can't control."

Ivy set her jaw. "You and Erika wanted me to go after Sabrina. Not Ash, *me*. I did what I had to do."

"You violated her."

"She violated this entire fucking city! She's the reason Golduck's dead, the reason Team Rocket was even here. All of this is *her* fault. How can you stand there and defend her to me?"

Warmth tingled on Gary's cheeks, and he looked away. "I dunno. I just... I dunno why, but something in you was different. It was like I didn't recognize you."

Wigglytuff twitched its ears as it followed their hushed conversation, hair standing on end as the energy in the room shifted and spiked between them.

"So that's it, then," she said. "You just *don't know*, and I'm s'posed to accept that."

"Ivy, please—"

"No, I understand." She slipped off the bed and winced as her bare feet hit the cold tile. "Believe me, I understand exactly where this is going."

She looked around for her boots and spotted them along with a fresh change of clothes. Gary reached for her elbow to help her move, but she yanked away.

"*Don't* touch me. I might just kill you, too."

He glared after her as she slowly made her way to the small bathroom, clean clothes in hand. Her shoulder and arm were still wrapped up and healing, but she yanked the IV tubes out of her wrist and let them leak onto the tile. Gary stood in the room alone when she closed the door on him and ran the shower. Wigglytuff looked at him from the bed, and he pressed two fingers to his temple to temper the ache in his head.

"Fine," he said softly before storming out of the room with every intention of doing something very physical to blot out the migraine and all logical thought.

Ivy, stripped bare and huddled on the floor of the tub under the showerhead, squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face in her knees, shaking with every full-body sob washed away under the falling water.

"A little higher," Misty said.

Starmie, glowing blue with Confusion, lifted a twenty-foot long metal beam high into the air and hovered it next to a Silph cherry picker, where an engineer with a Flareon welded it into place. The new gate would reach the very top of the wall to replace the caved-in stone.

"You've been very helpful, Misty. I cannot thank you enough."

Misty nodded to the old man who drew up next to her. "It's fine, Master Anko. I'm happy to help."

The old Bellator, having refused a hospital bed so that he could help with the rebuilding and rehabilitation of Saffron alongside his Pokémon, glanced askance at her. He held a gnarled, wooden cane with a steel tip that he leaned his weight on while he recovered physically. A burly Poliwrath stood by his side, silent and crouched on all fours, while his Machamp assisted with some of the heavy lifting closer to the gate. He tugged on his long beard.

"I've seen many wars in my lifetime, and they always end the same way. Both sides are always disappointed and in pain, and victory, in a sense, is only an illusion."

"There's nothing illusionary about this victory. Saffron'll be better off without Team Rocket and Sabrina, there's no doubt about that."

She had only slept a couple hours at a time over the past few days as

the Cerulean soldiers rested and recovered after the hard-won victory, choosing to keep as busy as possible. Violet only saw her during those brief respites, and Misty passed out in a stupor before her older sister could get her talking much. Everyone else she avoided for the most part. It was easy in the chaos of a war torn city.

"Yes, on that count I believe we can all agree. Still, the greatest victories come only after the greatest of sacrifices. I think it's important to pay homage to those sacrifices, so that they will never be forgotten."

Misty narrowed her eyes. "Listen, Master Anko. No disrespect, but that's none of your business. You don't even know me."

He sighed and looked down at her with kind eyes, so soft and forgiving that there was no way she could kindle her fury around this man. "Perhaps not, but I know what it is to lose someone more precious than even the spoils of victory." He put a spindly hand on her shoulder and smiled. Crows' feet crinkled around his eyes. "So please, do not make the same mistake I made. Do not forget your sisters, the one who is gone and the one who remains, or you may soon forget yourself, too. And that would truly be a tragedy."

Anko let his hand fall and he hobbled forward to join his Machamp. Poliwrath ribbited and hopped along after him before Misty could respond. Starmie hovered back to her and stopped just short of running into her, its innate sense of direction and proximity precise and uncanny. Misty ran a hand over one of its many coral-encrusted legs.

"What if I want to forget?"

Starmie's enormous gem glowed faintly and radiated a ghostly warmth. Misty tucked her bangs behind her ear and looked to the sky. Cumulous clouds, fat and puffy, floated lazily by toward the sinking, afternoon sun. She let her eyes fall closed and took a deep breath. Tears gathered at the sides of her eyes, but they didn't fall.

"Hey, Misty!" Forrest shouted to her. "We could really use your help over here!"

Misty blinked and waved to Forrest, where he was standing next to Onix. "Coming!"

Lily patted one of Dodrio's feathered heads to calm it while a nurse

sprayed its stitched up side with a Super Potion.

"Your Dodrio will be okay with some bed rest," the nurse said. "Her wound was deep, but it was a clean cut."

Lily nodded. "That's good. See, Dody? You'll be okay in no time."

The sedated dodo peered up at Lily with half-lidded eyes.

"Even Ivy wants you to get better soon."

Ivy stood very close to Lily as she stared, wide-eyed, at Dodrio. Her left arm, while almost fully healed thanks to the effects of several Super Potions over the course of the last few days, was tucked in a navy sling.

"I can't believe I let you drag me in here," she said.

"You know, the only way you're gonna get over your fear of birds is to hang out with them. Dody's a good bird, and she's pretty much passed out, too." Lily took Ivy's good hand in hers and pointed it to Dodrio's leftmost head. "C'mon, just a little pat."

The nurse, a middle-aged woman with silver hair and thick glasses, smiled a little and looked up from her work patching up the large bird. "I assure you, Dodrio is heavily sedated and won't lash out. It's perfectly safe to be around her."

Ivy swallowed and cast Lily a nervous glance. Lily smiled brightly and nodded. Hesitating just a little, Ivy flexed her fingers and slowly reached for Dodrio's leftmost head. Gingerly, she ran her fingers over the bird's feathered crest.

"Oh..."

"What is it?" Lily asked.

"I... Well, she's just softer than I thought."

Lily watched as Ivy ran her hand over the black-feathered crest again, this time with a little more confidence. The beginnings of a smile tugged at her lips, but just then Dodrio's eye opened a little and tried to focus. Ivy gasped and pulled her hand back as though burned.

"Hey, don't stop now," Lily said. "She liked it."

"She's s'posed to be asleep!"

Lily grabbed Ivy's hand and made her pet Dodrio's crest again, and the bird's eyes dilated and lulled.

"See?"

The nurse glanced up at the two young women and smiled to herself. "I'll let you know when you can come back for Dodrio. I believe Gary Oak's ticket includes her with several other Pokémon? He'll receive notice when they're all sufficiently patched up."

"Oh, yeah, that sounds great. Thanks."

Ivy peered into Dodrio's dark eye, a little starstruck as she gave the bird one last pet. Their business finished for the time being, Lily looped her arm through Ivy's and pulled her out of the OR.

After a short walk down the hospital wing, they emerged in the trademark, carnelian lobby. It was identical to the Cinnabar Pokémon Center save for its size: Saffron's was vastly larger and more accommodating to all sorts of critical trauma and disease, and they had experience with all kinds of Pokémon, from Pikachu to Onix and more.

"Hey!"

Ash was making his way downstairs with both his and Lily's Pikachu trailing close behind. They had moved out of the hospital now that Ivy's and Lily's injuries were no longer critical and rented two rooms in the Pokémon Center for the duration of their stay in Saffron.

Pikachu scurried toward Lily and leaped into her arms. "I'm happy to see you, too, ChuChu!"

"How's Dodrio?" he asked as he approached the two girls.

"Dody's gonna be okay."

He smiled a little. "That's good. Man, Ivy, you shoulda seen that bird go after this huge Poliwrath like it was an all-you-can-eat buffet. Honestly, I'm glad it's on our side."

Lily scratched Pikachu behind her ears and earned a satisfied squeak. "Dody's a nice bird. Well, as long as she's not fighting or hungry. Did you know Dodrio eat three times as much food as Fearow and Pidgeot? They have three stomachs, so each head has to eat. Isn't that amazing?"

Ivy laughed and slung her good arm around her shoulder. "If you think it's amazing, then I do, too."

They exited the Pokémon Center and made their way to Pythia District past the cleanup efforts and new gate construction. The bulk of the invading forces had set up camp in Pythia District around and within Sabrina's Gym to make use of the otherwise empty space while the citizens of Saffron reclaimed their homes.

"Hey, Ash," Ivy said. "You haven't seen Gary around, have you?"

Ash clasped his hands behind his head and Pikachu poked its head between his bent right arm. "Not lately. He's been really giving it his all with the rebuilding. Actually, that reminds me. Have you seen Misty at all?"

Ivy shook her head. "No, sorry."

His face fell. "Man. I hope she's okay. Just... After what happened to Daisy, I wish I could be there for her. Violet said to give her time till I got better, but I still haven't seen her anywhere."

Lily looked between the two of them and hugged Pikachu closer. "I guess it's none of my business, but I'm sure they'll come around in time. This was a hard time for everyone. I'm glad it's over."

Ivy averted her gaze. "I hope you're right."

Ash smiled brightly, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Yeah, you're totally right, Lily. Besides, something good came from all this."

"Huh? What's that?"

He leaned a little closer to her face and nudged her. "Well, I got to meet you, obviously."

Lily pulled back from the proximity and tripped over a chunk of rubble with a yelp. Ivy caught her by the elbow and saved her a painful faceplant at the last minute. Heat warmed her cheeks as she struggled to regain her composure.

"Whoa, watch your step. This place is still pretty chewed up," Ash said.

"Y-Yeah, thanks."

Ivy said nothing, and they continued on past Wall Pythia to the Gym. Celadon, Pewter, Vermilion, and Cerulean soldiers, trainers, and

Pokémon milled about the area in various states of recovery. Most were handling food supplies for transport back to the remains of the Dojo, where the Bellators were handing out relief packages. Others were breaking for lunch and talking. Their conversations, peppered with laughter, filled the air with a pleasant humming. A Celadon warrior poured a drink for a Pewter trainer relegated to a wheelchair while his broken leg healed. A burly Vermilion ex soldier laughed at something a slender Cerulean trainer about half his size said with a snicker.

"Wow," Ivy said. "Look at that."

Lily spared Ash a covert look as he glanced at the people they passed, an almost sad glint in his eyes. But when he smiled this time, her steps became lighter just looking at him, the way he'd smiled when they'd crash landed together at the base of Silph Tower, just happy to be alive and together.

"Yeah," he said. "I guess a lotta good came from all this, in the end."

"Hey, boys and girls! Who's got room for a cold one?"

Officer Jenny, flanked by her massive Arcanine and two male Lavender Police Department officers, walked among the resting troops and directed her officers to set down a large, aluminum keg. She waved a manual spigot for everyone to see, and soon cheers erupted among the troops. They lined up to fill their cups with cold beer.

Jenny left her two subordinates to oversee the distribution and spotted Ash, Ivy, and Lily where they had stopped to observe. She waved and jogged over with Arcanine in tow.

"Well, if it isn't the heroes themselves," she said with a smile. "How're you guys doing?"

Arcanine panted happily and bumped Ash in the chest. He laughed and scratched the oversized canine's muzzle.

"Happy to see everyone recovering and getting along," Ivy said. "Good move with the keg."

"Hey, if there's one thing I know, it's how to keep a bunch of war-weary soldiers' spirits up." Her expression darkened as she scanned their faces. "This was a hard victory, but it was a victory nonetheless. Don't forget that."

"I wish I could tell that to everyone who lost people and Pokémon in the fighting," Ash said as he scratched Arcanine behind the ear.

Jenny grabbed his hat and ruffled his hair despite his inch or two height advantage. "You can, and you should. We wouldn't be here now without their efforts. Everyone chose to be here, to fight because of what you guys and Gary did to bring them together. I know I can't speak for the others, but in my mind and Lavender's, this was only possible because of you. To me, that makes the tragic sacrifices we all made to get here mean something."

"Wow," Lily said. "I guess you guys're kind of celebrities on the mainland, huh? There's a lot I gotta catch up on."

"I'll fill you in on everything later tonight," Ivy said. "I guess...a lot's changed since I last saw you."

"Oh, that reminds me," Jenny said. "Ivy, Erika was looking for you earlier. She said it was important and that you should go see her in the Gym as soon as you can."

Ivy rubbed her temple. "Okay, thanks Jenny. I guess I'll go see what her royal highness wants from me now."

Ash gave Arcanine a final scratch, and the trio headed for the Gym, careful to step around the makeshift camps the invading troops had set up. Ash shot Ivy a knowing look, and she rolled her eyes. When he noticed Lily's confusion, he leaned in and whispered, "Erika doesn't play nice with anyone, but especially not with Ivy."

The Gym had been cleared of the bodies Ivy had left in her wake when she stormed it in search of Sabrina. The electricity was also back on, and the roof's skylight was open. Warm sunlight filtered in and illuminated the arena. But it wasn't the open and welcoming atmosphere that caught the trio's attention.

"Professor Oak?!" Ash blurted out.

Oak himself was standing in the center of the arena conversing with Steven and a woman Lily didn't recognize. Both Oak and the woman were windswept and dusty, and they wore goggles lowered around their necks as though they'd just arrived after a hard flight.

"Oh, Ash? I was going to head into the city to look for you all," he said with an easy smile. "I was just telling Steven that it appears I arrived a bit too late to be of any help here."

The trio closed the distance to Oak and the others, and Oak embraced Ash in a bear hug.

"Professor, wow, I can't believe you're really here." Ash grinned up at him. "Man, it's good to see you. Wait'll Gary finds out you're here."

"Ah, yes actually, I did want to have a word with you all." His gaze shifted to Ivy. "I'm glad to see you're all still together. I'd hoped as much. I trust the boys weren't too much trouble for you?"

Ivy quirked an eyebrow. "I think that depends on what you mean by trouble."

Oak laughed. "Very true! And who's this?"

Lily hung back and just stared, wide-eyed. Ash glanced back and flashed her a smile.

"Oh, this is Lily, Ivy's friend. She's the one who revived Gary's Aerodactyl."

"My grandson has an Aerodactyl? You don't say! Well, then you must be Lily Kida."

"Y-You know me?" Lily said.

"I happen to have a top paleogeneticist as my former student. Aurea Juniper has praised your work to me every chance she gets, so I feel like I know quite a bit about you already!"

Lily's eyes watered and she laid her hands on her cheeks. "Oh my god. *The* Professor Oak knows my name." She looked between Ash and Ivy. "Wait, this is real, right? I'm not dreaming?" She grabbed Ivy's hand. "Pinch me so I know for sure!"

"What? I'm not gonna pinch you."

"It's not a dream," Steven said in his earth-shattering whisper. "Although, that would make things easier."

The woman Oak had brought with him stood stiffly and didn't say a word. She was clad in black armor with emerald trim, reminiscent of the Celadon warriors' armor but distinct. She also bore no crest or badge of loyalty, and her dark eyes studied the trio with a vacuous intensity that drew shivers down Lily's spine.

"Hold on," Ash said. "What's going on? I know you didn't show up here

randomly after we just took out Sabrina and Team Rocket."

"Professor," Steven said. "I would prefer to do this only once."

Oak's expression hardened. "Yes, of course. There isn't much time. I've already asked Erika to gather the other Gym Leaders here." He turned to the unnamed woman standing to his right. "If you wouldn't mind locating my grandson, I would be much obliged."

She flipped one of her long, chestnut pigtails over her shoulder and selected one of the Pokéballs at her hip. "Very well."

A flash of light later, a fifteen-foot, coiled basilisk reared up and curled its leafy tail around the woman. Leafy tendrils and thorns adorned its green- and gold-scaled body and formed a high collar around its Dragon-like head. Red eyes blinked two sets of lids, and a forked tongue tasted the air as it quickly located its master. Lily could only stare at the regal serpent and wonder at it.

"Serperior," the woman said. "Find the Clairvoyant."

Serperior tasted the air with its tongue again and lifted its armored head to the sky to take in the sunlight. The woman laid a hand on Serperior's glossy hide and closed her eyes. Ash squinted at her.

"Whoa, what the..." he trailed off.

Lily followed his gaze from the woman to the ground and out the Gym, like he was following something out, but there was nothing amiss that she could tell. "Ash, what is it?"

He shook his head, but before he could say anything, the woman spoke again.

"The Clairvoyant is south of the outer wall, exactly eight point three-seven miles from here." She pointed just left of the Gym door.

"Ah, thank you." Oak reached for a Pokéball and released a Slowking. The short, pink Pokémon stood tall and proud under a shell crown that was almost bigger than its inflated head and fixed its hollow gaze on Oak. "Shall we?"

Slowking hobbled toward Oak and allowed him to place his hand on its spiked crown. In the blink of an eye, Slowking Teleported Oak out of the Gym into thin air.

"Huh," Ash said. "So Professor Oak really is a Clairvoyant. I can't believe all this time I didn't know."

Ivy approached the unnamed woman but stopped short when her beast lowered its head and gently opened its maw to reveal two rows of sharp, albeit small teeth and four folding fangs almost half a foot long at the full length.

"So, who're you?" Ivy said.

"I'm only here on orders."

"And whose orders would those be?"

The woman said nothing to that, and Lily stepped forward. "Hey, Steven, are you okay after the fighting? I haven't seen you."

Steven's steely grey eyes lingered on her a moment, and he nodded. "I'm as well as can be expected. Unfortunately, the Silver Wing is another story."

"Huh? What do you mean? We got it from Santos."

"Apparently not."

"Silver what?" Ivy said.

Just then, the air popped and Oak, Gary, and Slowking materialized in between the gathered parties. Gary took a moment to compose himself and then stared up at Oak.

"Gramps," he said. "So you really are here."

Oak smiled brightly and slung an arm around Gary's shoulder. "Goodness, you've grown since I last saw you! There must be something in the water in Cerulean."

Ivy crossed her arms. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that a Clairvoyant knows what we've been up to all this time."

Gary caught her eye and they exchanged a look. Lily's smile fell as she looked between them, the way Ivy didn't face him but merely glanced at him over her shoulder.

"Good, you're all here."

Erika, accompanied by Misty, Sandra, and Brock entered the Gym

with her nose turned up like the air in here wasn't good enough for her to breathe. Immediately, her dark eyes settled on Serperior and its trainer.

"You... I know every Sylvan in Kanto and Johto worth knowing, but I've never seen you."

Sylvan? Lily thought, frowning.

"So that's it," Ash blurted out. "That's how you found Gary."

The woman crossed her arms and looked between Ash and Erika. She was a little older, perhaps in her mid or late twenties, and her pretty face was a mask of indifference, statuesque. Even her lush, brown hair and the almost cutesy, oversized buns securing her pigtails in place didn't do much for the chilly atmosphere around her.

"Ah, forgive me," Oak said. "This is Rosa. She's helping me investigate Team Rocket and the so-called Chimera Project on behalf of an old student of mine, Aurea Juniper. Lady Erika, I imagine you don't know her because she hails from the distant Unova region."

"I'm sorry," Misty said. "But I came here because I thought there was something critically important I needed to know. Not to be rude, but I'd like to cut to the chase or get back to work."

She stared directly at Oak with her hands on her hips and didn't so much as glance at Ash when he tried to catch her eye.

"Professor," Steven said. "Perhaps we could go somewhere a little quieter."

"Ah, yes. I could use something cool to drink after that hard flight in from Rustboro. Shall we?"

"There's a sitting room through here," Erika said, leading the group to one of the doors on the edge of the arena.

Oak recalled Slowking and Rosa recalled Serperior before following the rest of the group.

"Dude, who's the girl?" Brock whispered to Ash as they filed into the wide living room. "Professor Oak sure knows how to pick 'em."

"Sylvan. Probably not worth it if Erika's anything to go by," Ash whispered back. "Wait, you don't think she and the Professor...?"

"Hey, I just call 'em like I see 'em."

Ivy knocked them both on the heads as Rosa glided past them. "*Shut* up, you perverts."

It could have been a trick of the light, but Lily was sure she caught the ends of a smirk from Rosa as she passed them by to take a seat on a wooden bar stool by herself. Everyone else took seats on the well-made leather couches and recliners grouped around a wide, wooden coffee table. Misty sat between Sandra, who was here on Surge's behalf, and Brock, while Lily found herself sitting next to Gary. Steven remained standing by a window, legs and arms crossed as he looked out over the group.

"Well, I'm sure everyone would like to know why I've asked you to be here, and what I'm doing back in Kanto all of a sudden," Oak began. "I have to say, when I'd heard about what was happening in Saffron, I could hardly believe it. The only time Kanto's great cities have joined forces for a single cause was during the Great War. I'm sure it doesn't mean much coming from an old coot like me, but I have to say..." He paused and looked around at the young faces in the room. "I have to say, I'm deeply humbled and honored to be in your presence now. Your generation has done something none before you has been able to accomplish. From what little I've seen and everything I've heard so far, I'm confident and proud that we're seeing the beginnings of a truly unified state."

"Well, with all due respect," Brock said, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "None of us really wanted an alliance. You have those three to thank for kicking some sense into our butts."

All eyes turned to Gary, Ivy, and Ash, and Lily covered her mouth to hide her shock. Before her sat four Gym Leaders, among the most powerful and respected trainers and leaders in the world, and they looked to three kids now in anticipation.

"I admit I was...skeptical at first," Erika said, eyes lingering on Ash. "But given our mutual goals, I doubt I'm alone in saying my fellow Gym Leaders and I saw benefit in joining forces against Saffron to this very end."

Sandra crossed a fisted arm over her chest. "My Lieutenant couldn't be here today, but I know he feels very strongly that a united front is Kanto's best hope for a future free from Team Rocket. I represent his interests here with pride."

"We couldn't have done this without you," Misty said softly.

Ivy stood up abruptly. "Hold on. As much as I glad we're all singing kumbaya and shit, there's something you all need to know. One of the Rocket Agents I interrogated here in the Gym confirmed that Fuchsia's under their absolute authority. This fight's far from over."

Erika narrowed her eyes. "You *can't* be serious."

"Ivy, are you certain your information is good?" Oak said.

She glanced down at Oak and then Gary next to him. "I was thorough."

"No, it's true. I've seen it," Lily said.

All eyes turned to her, and she blushed at the sudden rush of attention.

"Please speak up," Steven said from his perch by the window. "I'd like everyone to hear this."

Ivy sat back down. Frowning and steeling her nerves, Lily got to her feet and looked down at the gathered Gym Leaders.

"I'm Lily Kida, a paleogeneticist with the Cinnabar Labs. I traveled to Fuchsia City because I'd gotten word of a new fossil discovery by a Dr. Salvador Santos. When I got to Fuchsia to examine the specimen myself, I was taken to the Gym, which was taken over by Team Rocket. They kidnapped me and brought me here, where they had me work on a top secret project commissioned by the higher ups." She glanced at Steven. "At least, that's what they wanted me to think."

She went on to explain the Silver Wing project, Santos's downfall, and a brief recounting of Silph's liberation.

"Wait a sec," Brock said. "So, if I got this all straight, you're saying we could be facing down Lugia? As in, *the* Lugia?"

"Lugia is a myth," Erika said. "One hasn't been seen in a millennium, and even then there are only unreliable accounts."

"Lugia's not a myth," Steven said. "I understand that it may be hard for you all to accept, but simply because you haven't seen something with your own eyes, doesn't mean it can't be." He let his steely gaze rove over the room's occupants. "Everyone in this room is a Tamer, if we can count Lieutenant Surge's vicarious representation through Sandra.

Adamantines, like Brock and myself, have the strength of stone and steel, as I'm sure Lily would be happy to vouch for. Reapers," he glanced at Ivy, "possess inhuman stealth and night vision, as well as a resistance to cold even Crystallos or Volucris may envy." Finally, his gaze settled on Lily. "And some of us possess powers beyond the moral or mystical.

"So given what you're all capable of doing, of what we see every day from Pokémon, mortal creatures like ourselves, is it so difficult to believe in myths?"

"It's not exactly easy," Misty said. "I wouldn't mind some proof."

"I would've been happy to show you proof. However, it's come to my attention that despite my best efforts, Team Rocket has absconded with the Silver Wing." Steven turned toward Oak and bowed his head. "I apologize, Professor. I did everything I could."

Lily looked between Steven and Oak and back again, each glance faster and more caricatured than the last. "Wait, the friend you were doing a favor for was Professor Oak?!"

"That's right," Oak said. "Hm, where should I begin?"

"How about at the beginning?" Gary said, although it came out sounding more like a demand than a question.

Oak nodded. "Right, always a good place to start. Steven's grandfather, Byron, and I are old friends. So naturally, I knew I could count on Devon Corporation's assistance after the attack on Pallet Town last year. Byron is of course retired, but his son and Steven's father, Joseph, is the current President and CEO of Devon. When we pulled that odd tech from the Snorlax in Pallet, I knew Devon would be my best bet at solving the mystery."

"Sorry to break it to you, Gramps, but we know all about the Chimera Project," Gary said. "We could've used some help about six months ago."

If Oak detected the edge to Gary's tone, he ignored it. "Yes, I'm aware of most of what's happened here in Kanto thanks to Bill's constant updates."

"Wait, Bill knew where you were this whole time?"

"He never said a word to me," Misty said when Gary shifted his

accusatory gaze to her. "I had no idea."

"Yes, technology can do many things, even send and receive data transmissions over thousands of miles. The XTransceiver is still in its fledgling stages, but it uses a similar technology to the Pokédex. Bill can't keep his hands still, and I needed to monitor the situation in Kanto lest things get out of hand."

"Understatement of the century," Ivy said, eyes narrowed.

Oak put up his hands. "Please. I know you have questions for me, but for now, I'd like to explain things to the Gym Leaders so they can be prepared for what may be coming next."

Silence befell the group, and Oak took a deep breath.

"Thank you. As I was saying, Devon's engineers are among the best in the world, second only to those from our own Silph. It took months, but they were able to reverse-engineer the Chimera technology. And what they found was downright horrific, to put it lightly.

"The hardware itself is an A.I., a robot that can think, for lack of a better term. I won't bore you all with the details, but this technology emits EM waves directly into the host's brain that turn it into a mindless drone capable of being controlled, very much like a puppet. The most alarming part of this discovery, however, was the knowledge of what the hardware could *not* do. Devon's engineers deduced that this technology, with a little advancement, could eventually shed its physical form and work as a remote radio wave. I'm sure I don't have to relay the implications of that."

"No," Ash said. "We saw some of that in Lavender."

"Yes, Ghosts were thought to be the easiest targets with their heightened sensitivity to EM waves. It would be much trickier to affect corporeal beings, and even the slightest deviation would render the technology null. But the point is, Devon convinced me that the possibilities not only existed, but that they're probably already underway, if they haven't come to fruition already. In the wrong hands—no, in *any* hands, this could lead to mayhem and destruction that would put the Great War's body count to shame. An army of Pokémon, unwillingly controlled and systematically united, would overpower the human race and obliterate us from existence."

"Whoa there," Brock said. "Why would Team Rocket wanna wipe out the human race? They're people, too."

"That's what I asked Steven to find out," Oak said.

"And from what I can tell," Steven picked up where Oak left off, "there's a clear connection between this Chimera Project and the Silver Wing. A technology that can control Pokémon, and a Pokémon whose existence is so threatening it's been relegated to mere myth? I assume we're all on the same page now."

"These are all theories still, of course," Oak said when Sandra looked like she was ready to protest. "We don't have any incontrovertible proof yet. But the evidence is largely in support of my position. I hope you'll grant me that much."

"I'd like to know where they got the technology to do any of this," Erika said. "You're talking about the cutting edge of the cutting edge. This is something I doubt more than a handful of people, if even that many, could create."

"Well, actually, that's why Rosa is here."

Everyone turned their attention to the silent woman sitting by herself and leaning against the bar with her legs crossed.

"Professor Juniper came across some hardware very similar to the Chimera hardware," Rosa said. "This was about a year ago when a swarm of Skorupi attacked Nacrene City for no reason at all. Long story short, Professor Juniper thinks whoever made the Chimera tech is also responsible for similar outbreaks across Unova."

"And the ones behind it all are an organization known as Team Plasma," Oak added.

Rosa pressed her lips together, but she said nothing further.

"My theory, and Professor Juniper's theory, is that Team Plasma's scientists somehow created the first iteration of Chimera technology. They either sold it to Team Rocket or it was stolen and released here in Kanto and Johto. Either way, the connection is solid and undeniable. When we discovered this link, Professor Juniper offered to send Rosa in her place to assist me in the investigation here while she's monitoring the situation in Unova."

"This Team Plasma group must have some brilliant scientists in their back pockets," Ivy said.

"Professor, what exactly do you want us to do about this?" Erika said.

"Saffron is in shambles, and as for me, I'd like to get back to Celadon and let my trainers have a hard-earned rest."

"Well, to be honest, I was going to ask for your help in liberating Saffron, but it looks like I missed the bandwagon by a few days." He laughed a little. "In any case, the Chimera technology needs to be destroyed, and the Silver Wing must be retrieved before it falls into the wrong hands. Like you all, I'm skeptical of the so-called legendary Pokémon, but I think I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"We'll go to Fuchsia," Gary said suddenly. He held Ivy's gaze, expression unreadable but determined. "You said they were there, right?"

She clenched her jaw. "That's right."

"Then we'll go. The Gym Leaders have done enough for now." He looked between Sandra and Misty. "You guys should all head home and recover, like Erika suggested."

"As much as I'm sure the Lieutenant would want to join you in this cause," Sandra said, "my priority has to be Vermilion and him. We lost a lot of good soldiers in the fighting."

Oak nodded. "I understand. Which is why I'd like to suggest we enlist help elsewhere."

"Blaine might help," Lily said, blushing a little when she felt everyone's eyes on her. "I mean, um, well, I'm from Cinnabar, and Team Rocket doesn't have friends there, I can promise you that. I'm sure if you told Blaine all this, he'd at least consider siding against Team Rocket."

"I had thought of that," Oak said. "But I know Blaine, and I know he doesn't involve himself in others' fights unless there's something in it for him. He's too cautious."

"Then we bring the fight to him," Ash said. "That guy's a Gym Leader, right? Then if one of us challenges him and wins, he'll have to listen to us."

Lily gasped. "Ash, no, you can't do that! Blaine's a General, and he's got the Fire Brigades on his side. You don't wanna face them, believe me."

"Mm, in this case, I'd rather try diplomacy first," Oak allowed. "Blaine

isn't the easiest man to convince, but perhaps he'll lend an ear for old times' sake."

Erika stood up. "Well, if that's all, then I'd like to return to the Dojo. Master Anko has agreed to draw up new treaty provisions and bring Saffron into the alliance once the reconstruction is finished." She paused and her gaze settled on Ash. "I can't promise more boots on the ground anytime soon, but consider your end of our bargain paid in full. I'll send a garrison to Lavender Town, as promised."

Ash nodded. "Thanks, Erika."

Erika headed for the door. Sandra followed her, and Misty wasn't far behind. Ash got up and tried to go after her, but Brock put a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, man," he said softly. "Might wanna wait on that for now. Let things sink in, you know?"

"I've waited long enough already."

Pikachu squeaked on his shoulder, but Brock didn't let him pass.

"Seriously, give her a little room. This'll pass. And you've got other things to worry about right now." Brock nodded back to the people who remained in the room. "I'll keep an eye on her, okay?"

"Ash," Gary said.

Ash balled his fists and nodded. "Fine."

Lily got up and approached Steven. "Hey, why didn't you say you were working with Professor Oak before? I probably would've trusted you without asking all those questions if you'd just said so, you know."

Steven smiled knowingly. "Forgive me. Titans are notoriously duplicitous. I couldn't take the risk with so much at stake."

"Titan? What the heck does that mean?"

"It's what you are," Oak said.

Rosa remained seated in her corner, silently observing, while Brock left and Ash rejoined the group.

"So that's what it's called," Ash said. "She's a Titan."

"Okay, can someone *please* explain what's going on? I keep hearing all these weird words like some secret code, and I just wanna know what it all means."

Lily's Pikachu leaped into her arms and nuzzled her chin, but even that didn't ease the frustration in her amber eyes.

Oak sighed. "I suppose I should have explained this a long time ago. Looking back, I imagine the information may have helped you more than hurt you." He looked between Ash and Gary. "I just wanted to be sure you two would remain together even after you found out. Call it learning from my own mistakes." He turned to Lily and smiled, wrinkling the crows' feet around his eyes. "My dear, you're a Tamer, someone with an inborn affinity for an element that certain species of Pokémon also possess."

He briefly explained the Tamer phenomenon, the different types, and identified Ash, Ivy, and Gary to her.

"Steven mentioned Crystallos and Volucris before," Oak went on. "They're Tamers with affinities for Ice- and Bug-type Pokémon. There's a name in the Old Tongue for each class of Tamer."

Lily shook her head. "So I'm a Titan? What does that mean?"

Ash approached her and raised a hand to the side of her face. She followed the motion as he dragged his hand outward through thin air. "Your aura's red. Like, so red I can't even really look at it for too long. And it comes off you like wings, all the way out here." He wiggled his hand about a foot and a half to the left of her face. "I've never seen one like it before. That's why I was so surprised when I first ran into you."

She swallowed. "And...what kind of Pokémon do Titans use?"

"Titans are Dragon Tamers," Steven said in a tone that made her shiver. "They're one of the most feared and respected classes."

Lily's eyes widened. "What? B-But I'm not scary! I'm five feet tall on a good day! I'm just a scientist!"

"Oh dear, please don't be alarmed," Oak said. "I think what Steven means is that there are few Titans in the world, and those that have made themselves known have tended toward infamy. Take the Kanto region's Champion, Lance. I'm sure you've all heard of him."

"Lily's nothing like Lance," Ivy said. "There's no way."

Steven's heavy gaze fell upon Ivy, and she visibly stiffened. "You've met Lance?"

"...Only once, in passing." Without thinking, she clutched her bum arm with her hand to hug herself. "I know he's the Champion, but I got a weird vibe from him, like he wasn't human or something. I guess that makes sense if he's a Titan, knowing what I know now." She paused and narrowed her eyes. "Actually, you give off kinda the same feeling."

Steven bared his too-white teeth in a smirk. "Do I?"

"Yeah, you do," Gary said, breaking his long silence.

Steven chuckled softly. "Well, I assure you, I'm only human. Although, I will say the more time you spend surrounded by monsters, the closer you drift toward them. Maybe in time, you'll understand a little of what I mean."

Ash shook his head. "Wait, that doesn't make any sense. Titans are Dragon Tamers, and I get how we can also train other Pokémon. But what about controlling Pokémon that don't belong to you?"

"Why do you ask?" Oak said.

When Ash locked eyes with her, Lily froze.

"'Cause that's what Lily did with Charizard when we were fighting in the garden. Charizard's a real pain in the ass who barely listens to me if he can help it. But I saw how you got him to fight that Nidoqueen like it was nothing."

"That's why Titans are so feared," Steven said. "They have a...stronger sway than other Tamers over Pokémon. But that control extends beyond Dragons to Pokémon who were once also Dragons, descendants of the species with diluted blood. Charizard is one example."

With Pikachu on her shoulder, Lily looked at her hands. "But all I did was ask Charizard to help. I figured he wouldn't wanna back down from the fight or something..."

"Perhaps," Steven said. "But Dragons and their descendents can't defy a fully realized Titan."

"You know, Erika said something like that to me back in Celadon," Ash said. "Something about a Tamer who can control different types of Pokémon. I wonder if that's what she meant."

"Whether that's the case or not, it's the reason Dragon Tamers have been able to exert so much influence in the world," Oak said. "Unova, for example, is home to the wealthy Fafnir Dynasty in Opelucid City. Lance comes from a long line of Titans, the Taki Dynasty in Blackthorn City. And as I'm sure you're aware, nothing happens in Johto without approval from Blackthorn."

"Rings a bell," Ivy said.

"So you're saying we'll possibly have to fight trainers who could brainwash our Pokémon without even using any technology?" Gary said. "This just keeps getting better and better."

"Now, hold on just a minute," Oak said. "Lance and the Elite Four exist to maintain order in Johto and Kanto. That's why they were created at the end of the Great War, to ensure nothing like that happened again. Blackthorn had its representative and another Johtan master of their choosing, and Lavender had a similar deal on Kanto's behalf. That way, everything was equal."

"Lavender? Wait, you don't mean Agatha, do you?" Ash said.

"Why yes, I do. Agatha was a founding member of the Elite Four, although her original colleagues, of course, are all deceased now. Mediums live quite a long time, and I'm afraid anyone born in a previous generation has no hope of outliving them."

"That reminds me," Gary said. "We met Agatha in Lavender Town and she had a lot to say about you."

Rosa continued to observe from her corner, and Steven leaned back against the wall again, equally silent. Lily curled up on one of the leather couches, still reeling from the various revelations about her and about Tamers in general.

"More like she didn't wanna talk before you had a chance to set the record straight," Ivy said.

Oak ran a hand through his windblown hair. "You know, I think I'll have that cold drink now."

Oak leaned back in his chair and sipped his half-drunk iced tea, but the refreshing beverage did little to settle him. Steven and Rosa had excused themselves now that the more pressing business was finished and headed back into the Gym proper. Ash sat with his legs folded, enjoying the feel of worn jeans and a soft T-shirt after so much time sweating in his armor. Pikachu curled up with ChuChu next to him, and Lily sat on the other end of the couch.

"Um, maybe I should go," Lily said.

Ash put a hand on her shoulder and smiled. "Nah, stay. You were with Ivy from the beginning, right? So you should be here."

She blushed and pulled her knees closer to her chest, making him smile wider.

Some scary Dragon Tamer, huh.

"We met Agatha in Lavender," Gary said. "She seemed to know a lot about you, but she wouldn't tell us much. Care to elaborate?"

Oak set down his iced tea on the table and leaned forward on his knees. "Well, what would you like to know?"

"Just start from the beginning. I wanna know why you were apparently close with one of the Elite Four and never mentioned that, not even when Pallet was attacked."

"It's not so simple, you know. The Elite Four don't have unlimited mobility and power. Remember, they exist to maintain the peace between Kanto and Johto, and the sixteen Gym Leaders in both continents act as their representatives and informants."

"Professor, no offense but you're dodging the question," Ivy said.

Oak laughed. "Yes, all right, all right." He paused a moment and studied Ivy. "You know, I knew what you were when we met. I can't pretend to have a Medium's Sight, but there's something in the air around you only Clairvoyants can detect. I'm sure you noticed this when you confronted Sabrina."

Ivy was seated in a loveseat with one leg folded under the other. She kept her expression carefully blank and held Oak's gaze. "If you knew what I was, then why suggest I go with them? Agatha was pretty convinced that we were a disaster waiting to happen."

"Ah, Agatha was always a little bit narrow minded. Kurt never tired of reminding her back when the three of us traveled across Kanto and Johto collecting data on all the Pokémon we could find."

"Kurt?" Gary asked.

"You were too young to remember him, I'm sure, but Kurt visited me in Pallet back when you were an infant." Oak smiled, his gaze far away. "Your grandmother always complained about how he would leave a mess everywhere he went. Always whittling Apricorns... The man was a genius with his hands, of course. He invented Pokéballs."

"Whoa, that's pretty awesome," Ash said. "You knew the guy who invented Pokéballs?"

"He was the best man at my wedding. We've been the best of friends ever since we were your age, maybe a bit younger."

Gary had fallen still. "You never talk about Grandma Tabitha."

Oak shifted in his seat. "Yes, well, there's not much to say, I suppose. But...since you want to know about Agatha, there's no avoiding it." He rubbed the grey stubble on his chin. "Agatha and I... Well, to put it bluntly, we were the closest of friends. For many years, we were even closer than friends." He laughed a little. "Those were the days, when I was young and full of hope and excitement, discovering the world for the first time. I imagine you've all had that feeling traveling across Kanto or acquiring new knowledge. It's an exhilarating feeling.

"Agatha agreed to go to Johto with me. I believe she said something about how I'd likely step on a Wooper with my head stuck in the clouds as it was, and that would be the end of poor Sam Oak. But I knew she couldn't pass up the chance for such an adventure. After all, we were doing something nobody else had done. When Kurt joined us in Azalea Town, all of a sudden we had a way to catch and contain Pokémon that became violent or hostile. You can imagine how the possibilities seemed endless."

"And you catalogued every species you found," Gary said.

"Exactly. If you don't count the uncatchable Ghosts, which Agatha was more than capable of handling on her own, between the three of us we caught and studied every known Pokémon in Kanto and Johto, and even a few that weren't known until we found them."

"Wait a minute," Gary said. "Agatha said it was more than just a fun

cataloguing adventure. That the Pokédex was a bigger project."

"That's true. The Pokédex was a dream we three had for learning how to fight Pokémon. Back then, there were no cities with walls like Saffron, and the frontier was all we knew. Today, humans are still the minority species compared to Pokémon. Back then, we were as scarce as wild Pikachu. Pokémon dominated most of the land area, with human settlements clustered together in larger metropolises like Lavender, where Agatha hailed from. By cataloguing all Pokémon, we hoped to give people a way to defend against them and survive."

Oak paused and wiped his nose. "I'm ashamed to say this, but once we had all our data, I accepted funds from various sources to start research on how to organize it all into one easily accessible database on the condition that it be released to the military. My research was turned into a weapon to systematically eradicate Pokémon populations in key, resource-rich locations, including Goldenrod, Olivine, and Fuchsia, among others. I realized too late that knowledge is neither helpful nor harmful. It all depends on who controls it, and in my naiveté I handed that control over to the wrong people."

Lily and Ivy exchanged a look. "I think I know what that's like now," Lily said softly.

"What I don't get," Gary said, "is why you would keep all this from me. Why not just tell me? Daisy and I have asked you a thousand times about Grandma, and about Mom, too. You never talk about anything from your past."

"When Tabitha and your mother died in an electrical fire at my lab, you were just a baby. Agatha was the one who helped me pick up the pieces then, and after that there just...seemed to be nothing left to say." He paused rubbed his eyes, taking a moment to collect himself. "We decided together, Agatha and I, that things would be different for you and your sister. I asked her to stay away, and I tried to give you a life free from the burdens we had carried all our lives.

"I suppose I just didn't want you go through what I did. I knew I was Clairvoyant from a young age. It was never a secret, either for me or for Agatha. And because of that, my youth was an almost constant fight. Tamers, you see, were far more openly hostile toward one another back then, and it's why today most people tend to conceal their identities. It's also likely why Agatha was so surprised to see a Clairvoyant traveling with a Reaper. In her mind, it's one thing for a Clairvoyant and a Medium to ally because that was our situation, but

Reapers were traditionally our greatest enemies. Unfortunately, old habits are hard to break. I wanted to see if the three of you, who knew nothing of these affinities and the bloodlines behind them, could find a way to work together."

He paused a moment and looked between the four young people sitting in front of him. "A Medium and a Clairvoyant, a Reaper, and now a Titan. Bloodlines tell us there's nothing connecting you but hatred and old grudges. But together, I think you could accomplish something Agatha and I only dared to dream. I originally sent you three off together because I knew that by working together, you could overcome each others' weaknesses. I have a feeling that you'll need that bond now, more than ever."

His gaze lingered on Lily. "What Steven said about Titans is true. I don't know many, and I have to say I'm glad of that. They're an inward-facing bunch who insulate their children in order to keep them loyal to the clan. Lance struck me as different, a true champion of the people. Even Agatha praised him when he first joined the Elite Four many years ago. He was only fifteen at the time. You too, Lily, have a different outlook on life, like Lance. I imagine this is because your parents raised you in Cinnabar away from the Taki Dynasty's influence."

"Damn," Ash said. "Lance must really be something else."

Oak nodded. "He may be stronger even than our friend Steven due to the abilities his Titan class grants him. So that's why I have to contact him and the other Elite Four members and explain the situation in Saffron before Team Rocket can intervene or retaliate. Lance will surely help our cause when he finds out about what Team Rocket's been doing and I show him the proof Devon's amassed. Then we can put a swift end to this business once and for all."

"Whoa, wait a minute," Ivy interrupted. "We already had this conversation with Agatha. She said she was going back to Indigo Plateau and telling the Elite Four about how shitty Team Rocket is. We haven't heard from her since Lavender Town, and that was almost eight months ago."

"Is that so?" Oak steepled his hands and leaned forward in a way that made him look so much like Gary. "That doesn't sound like Agatha at all. If she informed the Elite Four as she said she would, there would have been decisive action a long time ago."

"Professor, what're you saying?" Ash said.

"Something may have happened to her. I don't want to jump to conclusions, but it's just not like her."

"So what're you gonna do, Gramps?" Gary asked.

"I'll have to reconvene with Rosa, but I'd like to make a stop in Indigo Plateau before I head to Cinnabar. If something's wrong, either the Elite Four will know and assuage my fears, or they won't and we'll get to the bottom of it together."

"Fine. Then we'll head to Fuchsia, like I said before."

"You're coming too, right?" Ash asked Lily.

"Oh, really? I mean, I wanna help, and I'm responsible for the Silver Wing... But I don't wanna slow you guys down or something."

"No way, I saw you fight! You were great! Just, you know, don't go fallin' outta skyscrapers again, okay?"

"We could use the extra help, actually," Gary added. "I don't know what a Titan can do, but if you come with us, maybe we'll all find out."

Lily smiled and nodded. "Okay, sure. I owe those Fuchsia Rockets a knuckle sandwich for what they put me through, anyway."

There was a pause, and Oak looked pointedly at Ivy. "Something you'd like to say?"

"Just something that's been bothering me a little about all this."

"Yes?"

"Don't you think it's weird that Agatha just up and disappeared? She's a Medium, an Elite Four, and one of the strongest trainers we've ever heard of. It bugged me before, but now I can't get it outta my mind. People like her don't just disappear."

"Hm, yes, I understand your concern. But Agatha has always been a bit capricious. More than likely, she returned to Indigo Plateau and the Elite Four voted to stay their hand with regards to Team Rocket. Did she have any evidence to convince them of her position?"

"Well, no, it was all destroyed that night in Lavender. But she was

pretty damn convinced herself."

Oak stood up. "Either way, I'll get to the bottom of it myself. The Elite Four are meant to be peacekeepers and deterrents of war. I'm not surprised they haven't acted yet if this could seriously jeopardize the stability they've brought to both Kanto and Johto. So rest assured, at least until we know something's wrong."

Ivy said nothing to that.

"Well, if it's all right with all of you, I'd very much like to bathe. It's about two weeks' worth of almost non-stop flying to get from Rustboro City to Saffron, and I must be as unpleasant to smell as I am to look at."

It was well past dark by then, and Ash's stomach was starting to rumble. He swallowed his hunger, however, and got up to stretch.

"Hey, guys? I'm gonna head to the hospital and see Surge. I'll catch up with you later."

They all rose and headed back out of the Gym. Gary hung back with Oak, while Lily headed back to the Pokémon Center and Ivy muttered something about Erika wanting to talk to her. Ash put his hands in his pockets and trudged back toward Dodona District to the hospital, more exhausted now than he'd been since the first morning after the Siege. He thought about Misty, but there was no way he'd find her in the dark now. Maybe Brock was right. Maybe she just needed some time. She'd been so icy back at the Gym with Oak...

Of course she was, Ash thought to himself. *That's what it's like when you lose someone you love.*

Pikachu squeaked in his ear as he walked along at a sedate pace.

"I know, buddy," he said as he stared at the ground underfoot. "I guess I just never thought winning could feel the same as losing."

Gary watched his teammates filter out of the Gym while he lingered with Oak. The old man went behind the bar to deposit his now lukewarm iced tea and rinse out the glass. Gary sat back down on the couch and hunched over his knees in silence. When Oak returned a couple minutes later, it was with two tumblers in hand, each filled halfway with straight scotch.

"Sabrina may have been a more unpleasant example of our kind," Oak said, "but she had good taste."

Gary looked up and eyed the drink for a few seconds, debating, but ultimately accepted it and took a long sip. The amber liquid went down as smooth as water, and he took another sip before setting the nearly empty tumbler on the coffee table in between them.

"She said it like that, too. 'Our kind.'"

Oak swirled his drink and sat back, as patient as he'd always been with his mercurial grandson.

"If I ask you something, will you promise to give me a straight answer? No dodging, no 'yes buts', just an honest answer. Even if you think I don't wanna hear it."

Oak took a sip of his scotch and studied his youngest grandchild. "I didn't keep all this from you out of malice. I did it because I thought I was protecting you. But...yes, you're an adult, and you've survived more than most. I'll try to give you as honest an answer as I can."

"Is it possible?"

"Is what possible?"

Gary hesitated as he mulled over his words. "Is it really possible that Agatha's wrong? That someone like me... That I can be close to someone who's not like us. That I can see past what's in front of me and try to understand where it comes from, because I wanna believe it's from someplace I recognize."

"Why don't you tell me what happened with Ivy?" Oak said gently.

"How do you...?" Gary blinked scowled. "Stupid question. You're Clairvoyant."

Oak smiled. "No, I just know you pretty well. I have to admit, I didn't quite expect this, but the thought had crossed my mind. As much as Agatha likes to think there are lines that divide us all, invisible walls we can't pass through, I always wanted to look at things from a different perspective. I see that in you, too. It makes you strong, Gary, and it makes you compassionate. You see the person behind the mask, just like you always have with Ash. I never had any doubt that you would do well with both Ash and Ivy, despite what you all are. It doesn't define you."

Gary ran his hands through his hair. "But I just don't know if that's true. I know Sabrina was bad news." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Golduck died because of her."

Oak set his drink down. "I'm truly sorry to hear that. Golduck was your first Pokémon, I remember him well. I doubt it's any comfort to you now, but I know what you're going through. You won't ever forget this pain, but I promise you it'll abate in time."

Gary shook his head. "Erika wanted her dead. I was suspicious at first, but I could see why after everything that happened. I wanted her dead, too. But Ivy, she... She was just...something else. I've never seen that side of her. Or maybe I didn't wanna see it." He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms. "Gramps, I just don't *know*. Agatha, and Sabrina, even people like Erika. I've gotten if from every corner that there's no hope, that it's not natural, that it's just gonna screw us both. I didn't care before, but now..."

"Gary."

Tears were smeared over Gary's palms and cheeks, and he looked up to meet Oak's identical, green eyes. He almost flinched at the hardness in them, unwavering in a way Gary had always tried to emulate in his younger days when appearances mattered more than attitude.

"I can't tell you what to do, but I can tell you this, and you can choose what to do with the information. I told you before that Agatha and I were lovers for a long time, but as you know, I married your grandmother in the end instead of her. There was a darkness in Agatha, just as there's a darkness in Ivy. It's a part of them. I loved Tabitha with all my heart, but to this day, I still have doubts. I still wonder, what if? What if things had been different? What if I hadn't been afraid? Agatha and I were on opposite ends of the spectrum, and in the end I was too afraid to appreciate what that really meant."

"What do you mean?"

Oak smiled knowingly. "Darkness and light have always been at odds. That'll never change. But they can't exist without the other. Just as shadows can't exist without light to cast them, darkness can only give light a place to shine. I realized that too late. I thought darkness and light could only ever consume each other in the end. But after so many years, I wonder if I was wrong.

"If darkness and light in their natural state exist only to extinguish each other, imagine, then, what great feats they could accomplish

together if given the chance."

Gary searched his grandfather's eyes, hoping for some clue, some sign that would give him the push he needed. "But how can I forget what she's done?"

"You don't, and neither will she. But you can try to understand each other. That's where it starts."

Oak held up his glass, and Gary clinked their glasses together after a moment's hesitation. The amber liquid warmed his throat and he sat back on the soft couch, eyes closed and tracing shadows with his mind's eye.

Ivy found Erika in her private tent in Celadon's section of Pythia District and promised Lily she would be around the Pokémon Center to join her for dinner as soon as she could. She pulled back the tent flap to poke her head in and immediately yanked it back out when she caught Erika in a passionate kiss with Lara. Red in the face, Ivy took a moment in the dark outside to breathe and calm down. She cleared her throat loudly.

"Erika, it's Ivy. I heard you wanted to talk to me?"

There was a pause before Erika responded in her usual, icy deadpan. "Come in."

Ivy counted another five seconds to give herself some more time to compose herself after having nearly interrupted an intimate moment, and pulled back the tent flap. Erika helped Lara to her feet, one of which was bound in a cast. She nodded curtly to Ivy as she headed for the exit.

"Sorry to interrupt," Ivy said.

"It's fine. I have something important for you, and it's been long enough already," Erika said.

Lara and Erika shared a last, brief glance before the former disappeared behind the tent flap and left Ivy alone with Erika. She then began to rummage about one of her packs in the corner as Ivy looked around. The tent was tall enough to stand upright in, and a lantern hung from the center of the roof. Erika's Vileplume was out of its Pokéball and curled up on the floor with its feet buried in the dirt, snoozing. There was no bottom tarp under the tent, and instead Erika

had blankets and sleeping bags laid out. A little rough for a self-proclaimed princess, Ivy thought. The cuts on Erika's face were scabbed over and nearly healed, though it had been days since the fighting ended. Surely even a measly Potion would have sealed them up by now, unless Erika had opted out of using one so someone else could.

"I believe this belongs to you." Erika held out her open palm in front of Ivy and revealed a small, round pin crafted of glittering yellow and rose gold. "For defeating Sabrina, you have the right to wear the Marsh Badge." She blinked and averted her gaze as Ivy accepted the small pin. "Wear it with pride."

Ivy stared down at the pin and plucked it from Erika's hand. It was heavier than it looked, and the swirl of rose gold in the center was almost hypnotizing, like Hypno's pendulum as it prepared to tear into Tyranitar with a Miracle Eye-enhanced Dream Eater.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because it's rightfully yours."

"No, I mean, why did she leave you?"

"...So, she talked to you about me."

"She called you her soulmate."

Erika turned away and kneeled down to smooth out Vileplume's magenta flower crown. The squat Pokémon ruffled its petals in response but remained dozing. "I knew she would take to you. You're so much alike, after all."

"I'm *nothing* like her. I'm not the one who sold my city and all its people to the devil."

"No, but there are other, perhaps more precious parts of yourself that you've surrendered." She looked back at Ivy. "That's why I wanted it to be you who went after her instead of the others. There was nothing she could take from you that you haven't already stripped away yourself. She couldn't hurt you."

"You mean, the way she hurt you."

Erika smirked and turned back to Vileplume. "Sabrina was my other half, I suppose. I loved her more than I can say, and I know she loved

me, as much as someone like her can love. But there was something off about her, there always was. Growing up, the other children sensed it. Yes, she was Clairvoyant, but it was more than that. There was a light in her so bright, it was blinding. No one could get close to her, except me.

"Until one day, I realized I'd been blinded, too. Sabrina was never going to be satisfied standing at my side, and even now I can't blame her for that. She wanted power, and she wanted to rule. When she swept into Saffron and obliterated the Dojo trainers, I could hardly believe it. It was like one day she was fine, and the next she was a murderess and a usurper. But I look back on that time now, and I can see how naïve I was. I didn't see the warning signs, and I have to live with the consequences of that oversight."

Erika paused and took a deep breath. Her delicate fingers traced over Vileplume's fleshy petals lovingly.

"Things only got worse from there. I had a treaty with Master Anko and the Dojo, and with Sabrina in power that was rendered null and void. I came here to Saffron to reason with her, but she ended up killing two of my warriors just to prove she was serious. I could even let that go." Erika chuckled softly. "But when she sent Rocket Agents to my door making demands on her behalf, I'd had enough. Team Rocket had bled my city dry with their underground casino for months until I finally ran them out of town. When I found out all the money they earned was going back to Saffron, I knew there was no hope left. She was bleeding Celadon dry to sustain her puppet regime. Maybe I should've been honored. She chose to screw Celadon over the other cities. I guess I'm special."

Ivy shook her head. "I don't get it. How could this happen when you were so close? How could you have not at least noticed where she was headed?"

Erika smiled sadly to herself. "Why would I want to see the worst in someone I loved more than anything?"

Tears stung Ivy's eyes, and her shoulders slumped. "You still love her, don't you?"

"I don't know if that's the right word." Erika looked back at Ivy, her princess mask back in place. "But I know that I can never let her go, not really. And I'll have to live with that for the rest of my life."

Ivy looked down at the small Marsh Badge in her hand, its intricate

swirl pattern blurry before her unshed tears. "So...how do you know if it's worth it? To go through all that just to lose her?"

There was a long pause as Erika watched her and Ivy stared at the gold pin, lost in its mesmerizing vortex.

"I don't. I can only move forward from here."

Ivy closed her fingers around the Marsh Badge and held back a sob with every shred of will in her body. Blinking, she looked up at Erika again.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"So am I." Erika returned her gaze to Vileplume. "But it's not worth anything. Not anymore."

Ivy nodded and ducked out of the tent, Marsh Badge in hand. Outside, the sky was black as pitch and sprayed with stars both large and small for as far as the eye could see. There was a waxing crescent smiling down at her over the eastern horizon, but it offered little light. Still, Ivy had no problem adjusting to the darkness.

Was it worth it?

She fingered the Marsh Badge between her thumb and forefinger. Lily was waiting back at the Pokémon Center to have dinner with her, so she wiped her eyes and started back toward Dodona District. As she went, she pinned the Marsh Badge next to the Boulder Badge inside her green cargo jacket.

With each step she took, she felt its added weight on her shoulders, a heavy shadow that clung to her back with wandering talons and a greedy grip.

18. Fuchsia City, Part 1

Triumvirate, chapter 18: Fuchsia City, Part 1
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

By the twelfth day after the Siege of Saffron, Ash was starting to get anxious. There was still so much left to do, and Team Rocket was still out there. His Pokémon were fully recovered, and Saffron was well on its way to rehabilitation under the Dojo's leadership. Oak and Rosa helped out with the rebuilding efforts, and even Steven hung around at Oak's request until the trio and Lily were ready to set off for Fuchsia.

Ash smiled at the thought as he tailed the two girls to Silph, where President Gordon had requested their presence.

"What're you smiling about?"

Gary kept his gaze straight ahead with his hands deep in his jean pockets. Espeon trotted at his side, equally as nonchalant but very much aware of what was happening in the vicinity.

Ash shrugged. "Nothin'. Just glad Ivy seems a little happier, is all."

"You think she wasn't happy before?"

Ash cast Gary a glance askance. "I think Lily's good to have around while you guys work out whatever the hell you gotta work out."

Gary set his jaw and kept his gaze steadfastly ahead. "It's not that simple, Ash."

"Che, whatever."

They hung back and lingered just outside Silph while the girls went inside, absorbed in their own conversation.

"Look, man, if you have something to say to me, then say it. We both know you're bad at beating around the bush," Gary said.

Pikachu sniffed the air on Ash's shoulder, and Gengar floated above him, distracted by Silph Tower's mesmerizing height. Ash himself fixed Gary with an unreadable look, red eyes scrutinizing.

"I dunno what's going on between you and Ivy," he said. "But whatever

you decide to do, make sure you can live with the consequences, good and bad."

"Don't be so trivial. Sometimes shit just happens and maybe there's no right answer."

"Sure there is. But right doesn't have to mean perfect. I'm just saying, you know... Don't make the same mistake I made with Misty."

Lily opened the glass door and poked her head out. "Hey, are you guys coming? President Gordon's waiting!"

Gary's gaze lingered heavily on Ash as they headed in after her, but he said nothing more. Gordon was waiting for them in the lobby, and Ash almost did a double-take at the sight of him. He was dressed to impress in a pressed, pinstripe suit, slicked silver hair, and clean shaven.

"Wow, Mr. President," Ash said. "You're lookin' pretty fly."

Gordon cleared his throat. "Of course I am. The last time you saw me I'd been trapped in a panic room for weeks without access even to basic hygiene. I should hope anything I could scrounge up at the last minute would show me in a better light than that, young man."

Ash laughed nervously, but Ivy elbowed him in the side. "Ow, what the hell?" he whispered.

"Anyway, I asked you all here for a very specific purpose." He went to the front desk and retrieved a rectangular, cherry wood box. "I'm sure you recall, Ash, that I promised to reward you for liberating Silph."

"Huh? Oh, well, about that. It was actually Steven Stone who ended up taking care of most of the Rocket Agents holed up in here."

Gordon fixed him with a thin smile. "Steven Stone didn't bother freeing me, and as far as I'm concerned, it was you and your colleagues who were responsible for Saffron's liberation." He looked between Gary and Ivy. "I'm told you're the ones to thank for Sabrina's downfall and unifying the surrounding cities to take up arms against the usurpers. The Gym Leaders spoke quite highly of you three."

Lily grinned and nudged Ash. He adjusted his hat, unsure what to do with his hands.

"I'm a man of my word, and I did promise Ash here a reward for his

assistance."

"That's really not necessary," Gary said.

"Of course it is. Besides, I've been holding onto these for quite some time now and I'd like to get rid of them. I decided against mass production due to the repercussions they could have in the wrong hands, but I think there's no harm in handing them over to you all. No one else has proven quite so worthy."

He held out the cherry wood box to them and lifted the lid. Three Pokéballs sat evenly spaced apart in navy velvet cushions, though their design was unlike any Pokéball Ash had ever seen. Instead of the trademark red on white, the tops of these balls were a deep violet, almost blue, and each bore the letter 'M' embossed in gold over the release button.

"These are Master Balls," Gordon explained. "They're my latest project before Archer and Team Rocket took over Silph."

"Master Balls?" Ivy said, taking one and holding it up in front of her face to get a better look.

"They're the product of many years' worth of research and innovation. They can catch any Pokémon, no matter how powerful, without fail."

Gary narrowed his eyes at the old man. "I don't mean any disrespect, sir, but that's pretty hard to believe."

"I understand your skepticism, but I can *personally* guarantee their accuracy. They use the most cutting edge technology that puts even Ultra Balls to shame. We haven't released them commercially for obvious reasons, and with Team Rocket showing its true colors, I doubt I'll ever authorize them for public use. The project is most likely a dead end at this point. However, I think in this case an exception is merited."

Ash took the middle ball and squinted at it. "It just looks like a regular old Pokéball. Just purple."

Gordon smiled. "Perhaps on the outside. But the Master Ball is the genuine article. It's programmed to subdue a hundred times the power of a fully grown Dragonite. It can contain anything."

"Wow." Lily examined Ivy's Master Ball and released the latch holding it closed. "Hey, this is Steelix platinum ribbing. That's some pretty

sturdy stuff!"

"That's just one of the minerals we used," Gordon said proudly. "I assure you, you'll be very happy with the results."

Gary plucked the final Master Ball from the box and tested its weight in his hand. "Well, either way, we appreciate the gesture. Thanks."

Gordon nodded and set the box back on the receptionist's desk. "Listen to me. Silph may have had a rough go of it lately, but my company's the technology leader worldwide for a reason. You try those Master Balls out yourselves, and you'll see what I mean."

Ash juggled his Master Ball between both hands. "If you say so. It's pretty lightweight for somethin' so strong."

Lily poked him in the chest and glared up at him. "You better respect that tech, Ash. This is *the* Philip Gordon telling you it's the real deal. That's the only guarantee you need, trust me."

Ash smiled and put up his hands. "Hey, I believe you." He turned back to Gordon and nodded. "Thanks for this."

Gordon's gaze shifted to Lily. "Well, at least someone's heard of me and my humble company. Young lady, I'm told you were also instrumental in the Siege."

Lily let her gaze fall. "No, sir. If anything, I just messed things up even more helping Archer create the Silver Wing. I... I'm so sorry."

"Be that as it may, what I care about is that my company is in the right hands once again and that Team Rocket is gone for good. I'm ashamed to say I authorized many illicit projects under duress for them, too, so I can sympathize with your situation a bit. I don't have any more Master Balls, but I think you may find the set of Brigandine armor I've commissioned for you an adequate consolation prize. I'm told you'll be joining these three in Fuchsia City?"

Lily gaped at the old man. "O-Oh my gosh, yes! That'd be so great, thank you! I really can't thank you enough!"

"Really, it's no trouble at all. Silph designs and manufactures the armor, anyway, so why not?"

"Gee," Ash whispered to Ivy. "I guess maybe I really shoulda known who he was."

She gave him a withering look. "You think?"

When they were finished talking with President Gordon, Ash pocketed his Master Ball and resolved to finally track down Misty. The foursome had decided to leave early the next morning for the long, hard flight to Fuchsia, and they'd already given Team Rocket ample time to prepare now that Saffron had fallen. Time was of the essence.

Ash ducked out from the rest of his group as quickly as he could, Pikachu in tow, and headed for Dodona District, where he knew Brock was still stationed for the reconstruction efforts.

"*I'll keep an eye on her,"* he'd promised Ash.

Steelix was impossible to miss among the many trainers and civilians, both local and foreign, who were participating in the rebuilding efforts. Ash bypassed them all and made a beeline for Brock and Forrest, who were busy directing their Pokémon to lift heavy stone and metal. Brock took one look at him and frowned.

"Ash—"

"Where is she?" he demanded.

Brock sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Man, listen, I'm not—"

"She's at the gate," Forrest interrupted.

He was a carbon copy of Brock, only shorter, like all Brock's siblings. Ash nodded stiffly.

"Thanks, Forrest."

Brock reached for him. "Ash, wait a minute."

"I'm done waiting." Ash brushed him off, and Brock's face fell. After a moment's hesitation, Ash rubbed his eyes. "Look, I'm sorry. I don't mean to take it out on you, that's not fair. It's just, I dunno. I just have to talk to her."

"Nah, man, I get it," Brock said. "Just... Well, I hope it works out. I'm sorry."

An uncomfortable heat pooled at the base of Ash's stomach, and he rubbed a hand over his middle, averting his gaze. "Yeah, right."

As he walked away to find Misty, he heard Forrest say to Brock, "You really think it'll work out?"

He was too far away to hear what Brock had to say to that, and he shifted his focus completely to locating and talking to Misty after all this time. The sun was bright and warm on this clear, cloudless day, and he was even sweating a little. Yet the weather didn't lift his spirits at all.

He found Misty with her Starmie and Vaporeon taking a break from manual labor to talk with one of the structural engineers, and when he found himself hesitating, Ash swore under his breath. This was *Misty*, the girl who'd saved him, the girl who'd stuck by him. The one who knew him best. There was nothing to be afraid of.

So he approached, and Pikachu's squeaking gave him away before he could say a word.

"Ash," Misty said softly, expression blank. Turning back to the engineer she said, "I'll just be a few minutes."

Without even glancing at Ash, she walked past him to a place by Wall Dodona where no one would overhear them. In the background, the sounds of construction and heavy machinery clinked and clanged like an out of tune orchestra, but they had a bit of privacy. Gengar hovered behind Ash, no more than a shadow, and Pikachu perched on his shoulder, ever observant. Misty crossed her arms.

"What do you need?"

Ash could only stare. "Is that really all you have to say to me? After everything that happened?" He looked to the side to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "It's been more than two weeks, and you've been avoiding me."

Misty narrowed her eyes. "I have not. I've just been busy."

"Busy. Right. Too busy to mourn your sister's death?"

"Ash—"

"Too busy to let me comfort you? To be there for you?"

He reached for her shoulders, and she swatted his hands away.

"Don't touch—"

She didn't get her demand out before he pulled her into a tight embrace against her will, and she was too shocked to push him away in time. In spite of her struggling, he held her tighter and buried his face in the crook of her neck.

"Misty, *please*," he said. "Just talk to me."

"Get off of me."

She tried to push him away, but he held fast.

"Please," he begged her, holding her closer. Pikachu jumped down on the ground and squeaked up at them. "Just let it out. I'm here."

She pushed and shoved him, desperate to get free, but he held on tight and took the half-hearted blows. Eventually she calmed down, her punches became no more than weak shoves, fruitless, and she hung her head, shaking. It took him a moment to realize that she was crying.

Ash hugged her closer. "I'm so sorry about Daisy. You don't even know how sorry I am. I'd give anything to make it right."

When she tried to pull away this time, he let her. Fresh tears shone in her eyes and made them glitter, like real aquamarines, and for a moment he drowned in her like he always had.

"I've already cried for Daisy, and it's not gonna bring her back," Misty said, sniffling. "But you..."

Ash frowned. "Me? Hey, I'm not going anywhere, don't worry."

Misty steeled her gaze, lips thin. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Sure I do. Look, okay, I know we parted on bad terms, and I guess that's my fault. I've been thinking a lot, and, well... Look, I'm sorry. I'm not just sayin' that, I mean it. Really, I'm sorry for how I treated you. I was a dick, plain and simple. I get that now."

Misty pulled away and he let her. She showed him her back and crossed her arms. "My sister's dead."

"I know."

"Violet might as well be so long as Surge is in critical. I don't think he's gonna make it."

"...I know."

She lifted her shoulders a bit as she took a shaky breath. "Ash..."

"Yeah?"

She hugged herself, hesitated a moment, but didn't turn back to look at him. "Come back to Cerulean with me."

A moment of silence passed between them as Ash processed her words. "Cerulean?"

Misty looked back, eyes wide and shining. "Yeah. You and me. This battle was hard, but we got rid of Team Rocket and freed Saffron. The Dojo can take it from here. So come back with me." By now, she was facing him fully, entreating him earnestly with all her might. She took his hands in hers and looked up into his eyes. "Come back with me."

The knot in Ash's throat was unlike any he'd ever had before. Just looking at Misty, every muscle in his body wanted to cave and go to her, hold her, kiss her like they used to. Before this. Before Team Rocket. Before Daisy died. Before.

"Misty," he said, holding his ground. "I want to. More than anything, I want to."

Her shining eyes, blue eyes like the sea and the sky and everything in between, darkened and fell just slightly, just enough to notice. "No, you don't. We both know I was right. There won't ever be a last battle for you. Not with Team Rocket still out there and new, maybe bigger threats like Team Plasma. It never ends, does it?"

"What? No, c'mon. Of course there's an end, and that's when we can be together."

"Then *when*, Ash?"

He blinked at her. "Well, you know, when Team Rocket's gone and stuff, and Kanto's safe again."

"And how long with that take?"

He adjusted his hat. "I mean, I can't say for sure, it's not like I can tell the future, but I know it won't be forever."

He would never forget the look on her face then. The half smile, glistening eyes, her lower lip red from biting, and yet so calm, so

quiet, like she'd rehearsed this a thousand times before and she knew how it would end. "I don't need to tell the future to know this is goodbye, Ash." She smiled, and tears welled in her eyes, but they didn't fall. "Never thought I'd hate being right."

Desperate, he reached for her and grabbed her arm. "Misty, no. Stop. You don't know what's gonna happen! I mean, yeah, I gotta help Gary and the others stop Team Rocket, but that doesn't mean I can't come back when it's over. Why can't you see that?"

"Because one of us has to face the truth, and if you won't, then I will." She pulled her arm away. "I lost my sister, Ash. My *sister*. The person I love most in all the world. I want you with me more than anything, you know I do. I *love* you."

Ash could only watch her, torn apart but unable to move and pick himself up.

Scum, a voice echoed in his head. His eyes widened. Had he always been like this?

"But you don't love me, do you? And you won't come back with me. You won't ever say 'enough is enough', that I'm more important than whatever mission's waiting out there, will you?"

"Misty, *please*—"

"No, it's okay. I told you before, it's okay. I think... I think I always knew the kind of man you are. And I know I can't stop you. I couldn't live with myself if I did, and neither could you. It wouldn't be right."

His eyes fell, and his skin burned with shame. Pikachu tugging on his pants was like knives on his skin as he trembled. "I can't replace Daisy. I can't go back with you. Not now."

Her hand on his cheek startled him, and it showed. She was smiling through her tears. "I know. And I know it's selfish, but I hate that you can't. So please, just let me go. Let me go home, away from here, away from all this. If you won't come with me, then just let me go."

He had no words for her, no pretty reassurances, no lies, no false promises. There was only the truth between them, for once bared for all to see, including him. Tears stung his eyes as she held out her hand to him, a formal gesture that bespoke nothing of the intimacy they'd shared, nothing of the whispers they'd exchanged in twilight's half shadows, between soft sheets and under starlight. And when he took

her hands in his, he could barely remember the feel of her skin, her warmth, for it was gone so soon as he whispered one last promise to her.

"I'll end this," he said, meaning it. "I swear, I'll end it."

Misty smiled, and his heart broke. "I know you will. You'll be the best there ever was."

She was gone before he knew it, and his hand was cold where she'd once been.

When Ash left Silph, Ivy and Lily soon followed and meandered off on their own without waiting for Gary. Lily cast him a glance over her shoulder as Ivy spoke and he caught her eye, but he couldn't make out what the girls were saying as they headed back to the Gym. Hands in his pockets and Espeon by his side, Gary exited Silph and wandered around Pythia District.

There was work to be done, but he couldn't bring himself to do much at the moment and thus wandered toward the garden occupying the block behind Silph where Ash and Lily and Steven had supposedly fended off a hundred Rocket Grunts and their Pokémon. Anyone who could stand shoulder to shoulder with Ash and earn his heartfelt praise was worth taking seriously in Gary's book, though he'd never admit it to his longtime rival and friend.

Dragon Tamers were said to be arrogant to a fault and steeped in almost primeval tradition, as rare as their egos were inflated. Gary had taken it upon himself to research and learn as much as he could about the various Tamer classes during his time in Cerulean, knowing neither Ivy nor Ash would put in the time. Only a few Dragon Tamers were active in Johto and Kanto today, including Lance and his cousin Clair of Blackthorn City, as well as the Elder Dragon Master, Clair's grandfather and reigning King of the Taki Dynasty. The Taki Dynasty was of the Old Blood of Sinnoh, where the first Dragons originated and their Tamers with them. The legend said that three sisters each set off to different parts of the world to cultivate their own version of Dragon Taming. One journeyed to Kalos, another to Unova, and the final one to Kanto to found the Apep, Fafnir, and Taki Dynasties, respectively.

But they lost touch, and their bastards and exiles fled to Hoenn, where new Dragon Tamers blossomed and took control of key resource-rich

areas like Ever Grande City and the Pacifidlog Islands. Nevertheless, the Titans of old were the most feared and respected Tamers alive, for their Dragons could withstand almost any attack. To think that Lily was one of them could only be a stroke of good fortune in Gary's opinion. Whatever Titans could do, whatever made them so infamous and feared had to be worth cultivating an ally among their ranks. Clairvoyant as he was, even he could not see the future or what horrors it held in store for him.

Steven found him walking slowly along the garden lake and brooding, as he was wont to do, and stirred him from his reverie. "Gary Oak. I didn't think I'd find you here."

Gary peered at the Champion of Hoenn with guarded eyes. "Yeah, back at you."

Steven stuffed his hands in his pockets. "You look like you've got something on your mind."

"That'd be none of your business."

"Of course. Although, I'm the Champion of Hoenn, you know. I've seen quite a bit in my days."

Gary frowned as he kicked a rock into the lake. "I'm not Ash. I'm not gonna buy the act. What do you want?"

Steven smirked. "I believe it's what *you* want. Our families are close, and I'm here because your grandfather asked it of me. Perhaps I can help." He paused before adding, "And trust me, I doubt there's anything you can help me with as you are now, so let me do the honors."

Never had Gary felt the urge to punch someone more than he felt it now, but punching an Adamantine was probably the worst idea he could ever have. They were built like stone and steel, impenetrable as the Pokémon they commanded. Steven Stone, however, was a Champion for a reason. And as long as he was offering, why not? Gary was no Titan. He could swallow his pride for such a rare conversation.

"The whole Titan thing with Lily... I guess I'm not sure if it's good or bad."

"A wise concern. Titans are strong in both mind and body. I suppose Lily must be from an outcast sect, maybe even bastard-born."

"Huh?"

"It's obvious she has no ties to the Taki Dynasty. Wherever she came from, her parents must have known their origins and chosen to escape them, undoubtedly for the better." He paused and peered at Gary. "She'll prove an invaluable ally on your journey. I've seen her fight and think in action, and she's loyal." He paused and gauged Gary's frown. "If there's one thing I've learned as the Champion, it's to surround myself with those who would fight a different battle than the one I would. A Titan...well, there's nothing *quite* so different as them if you can sway them to your cause."

They settled on a stone bench overlooking the water. Espeon hopped up onto Gary's lap and purred. "You've trained your Psychics well. They aren't normally the most sociable bunch."

Gary leaned forward against his knees and frowned. "Maybe Espeon, but now I've got Alakazam to think about."

"Mm, Sabrina's Alakazam." Steven paused. "It chose to accompany you despite what happened, isn't that right?"

"Ivy doesn't trust it."

Steven chuckled. "I can't expect a Reaper to trust any Psychics. Though she's come a long way trusting you."

"You don't seem to get tired of reminding me how you're the Champion, so you of all people should know this. There's a technique Sabrina claims she invented, the Miracle Eye. It can hit Dark Pokémon."

Steven kept his expression carefully schooled. "That would be a powerful trump card for any Delphi."

"Not would, *is*. I saw it." He ran a hand through his hair. "Have you ever heard of something like that? Or...or some way I could replicate it?"

"No," Steven admitted.

Gary's shoulders slumped and his eyes fell a little.

"But the fact that Sabrina could do it means other Delphi can, too."

"What do you mean?"

Steven's steely eyes were unsettling just to look upon, like they weren't eyes at all but some kind of vapid nothingness that didn't even see him. There was something in him that belied a cruelty just beneath the surface, something ugly and vengeful, and Gary had to wonder if he was really here to help them at all. Was this what it took to become the Champion, the best there ever was? To forsake all human empathy for the sake of power and dominance, just to carry the name?

He had to admit the name alone, a mere utterance, was more fearsome to behold than the threat of what lay ahead in Fuchsia, and he hated himself for it.

"I mean that I didn't become the Champion by questioning what I already knew to be true."

Steven stood up and stretched lightly. His knuckles cracked like metal gears smacking against each other, loud enough to make Gary wince.

"I won't be going to Cinnabar with your grandfather," Steven said. "I have other pressing matters to attend to in Hoenn." He turned back to Gary and held out his hand to shake. "But I expect our families' good relations to continue long after this...unfortunate turn of events."

Gary accepted the offered hand and shook it, his green eyes carefully trained on Steven. "Of course. I would only hope you'll find time to remember us all the way out here in the Old Continent from time to time."

Steven smiled at that. "Fear not. I have a long memory, for better or for worse." He stuffed his hands in his pockets and started for the other end of the garden. When he was at the other side of the lake he called back without turning, "Good luck to you and your team, Gary Oak."

Gary watched him go, thoughtful. Something about his words bothered him, but it was too late to say anything.

My team, he thought.

Including Lily, that made four of them and more than a dozen strong Pokémon. A far cry from the Elite Four themselves, but a foursome nonetheless.

"*I don't know what a Titan can do,"* he'd admitted earlier at the Gym.

He didn't much know know what even *he* could do now that he had

Alakazam. But he was determined to find out.

Ivy buckled Crobat's saddle and scratched the huge bat behind its fleshy ear. "Looks like you're feeling a ton better, huh Batty?"

Crobat turned and butted its snout against Ivy's arm, now fully healed and padded courtesy of Sabrina's extra Gym-regulation armor. The Marsh Badge was pinned to her jacket next to the Boulder Badge, hidden from sight under her Brigandine, but she felt its weight as she breathed in deeply. The foursome was gathered outside Sabrina's old Gym, having said their goodbyes to the other Gym Leaders and soldiers, though some of them looked on as the group prepared to leave for Fuchsia.

"Oh my *god*," Lily gushed. "I really get to ride him?"

"Since you don't have a Flyer, it's the only choice," Gary said. "Aerodactyl's big enough to hold two riders, so it's not a problem."

She squealed in delight. "I can't believe this is happening. Ah! Where's a camera when I need one? I bet you fly like the wind, huh Rocky?"

"...Rocky?"

"Yeah! He looks like a Rocky, don't you think?"

She was grinning from ear to ear and petting Aerodactyl's snout. Somehow, the reptile was amenable to her touch even without Gary's order.

"Well..."

Aerodactyl made a deep-throated rumbling noise as Lily scratched the base of its left horn, eyes dilating. Her Pikachu squeaked and waddled onto Aerodactyl's outstretched neck, sniffing the jagged shale scales as it tried to get its footing.

"I think it's a great nickname," Ivy said with a half smile. She felt Gary's gaze shift to her but remained focused on Lily.

Lily giggled. "I think Pokémon like having nicknames. It gives them kind of a unique identity, you know?"

She was clad in her new armor that replaced her usual yellow and brown tunic and leggings. All-black didn't suit her and her thick,

blonde ponytail, and the red accents along the segmented joints didn't help much. But it was sturdy, top of the line armor courtesy of Silph, so no one complained.

"You can call Aerodactyl whatever you want, I guess. Can't promise he'll respond to it, though," Gary said, shrugging.

Ash was checking Charizard's saddle, who did not look happy to have the leather monstrosity strapped to its back again. But Ash said nothing even to the orange lizard's warning snarls, like his mind was elsewhere and his hands were merely going through the motions.

"I certainly hope you didn't plan on leaving without a final word of parting!"

Oak's voice drew the group's attention, and the old man approached with Rosa in tow. He smiled and drew up next to Gary and Lily, almost beaming at the sight of Aerodactyl.

"It really is magnificent," he said, admiring the winged reptile. "Lily, you've truly accomplished something incredible, and Gary, as I live and breathe, I never imagined I would see a tamed Aerodactyl."

Gary patted the beast and earned a high-pitched squawk. "He's a good Pokémon. A little quirky."

"Hm, well, I should very much like the chance to examine him a bit more once this is all over. Anyway, I don't want to hold you up any longer. I just came to say goodbye until we meet again soon."

The sun was barely up, and Saffron's great walls obscured it from view entirely. Ivy could see as clear as day, but the shadows of night hung thick in the air about the foursome as they prepared for the next fight so soon after this one was won at a steep price.

"Do you regret it at all?"

Frowning, Ivy turned and found Rosa standing near her and eyeing Crobat with an unreadable expression. The others were still in conversation with Oak and paid the two women little mind. Rosa had a couple inches on Ivy, and in the morning sunlight the jade accents in her black armor shone like gemstones. They brought out a deep, viridian glow in her dark eyes and Ivy had to wonder if they weren't brown at all, but in fact a green so shaded it was nearly black.

"Regret what?"

"Leaving Team Rocket."

Ivy blinked, and her surprise was plain to see on her face. "Why would you ask that?"

"You're fighting this crusade, and from what Professor Oak tells me, you started all this. Wasn't it difficult for you to work against the people you used to be allies with? Maybe even friends?"

"No, actually, it wasn't. I didn't join Team Rocket because I wanted to. And what they're doing with Chimera's unspeakable. But I guess we've got your Team Plasma to thank for that."

Rosa set her jaw and her eyes flashed with emotion too fast to identify, but it was gone in an instant. "I guess the evidence would suggest that much, yeah. Still." She looked back at the group, and Ivy followed her gaze. "Some things are easier said than done. When you've known something all your life, it's hard to forget it." She turned back to Ivy, eyes half-lidded. "It's hard to forget the people you left behind, even when all the evidence tells you to do just that."

A short silence passed between them as Ivy searched the older girl's eyes, as if the harder she looked the easier it would be to dismiss what was right there. She thought about Marco, and about Will, and most of all, she thought about Karen. Her face was buried in the shadows of memory, a face cast off when Ivy put Team Rocket behind her. But with eyes that could see perfectly in the dark, there was no forgetting her no matter how buried in darkness she was. Had it been so long? There had never been any time to worry about what could have, should have been, not with Team Rocket chasing Ivy to the ends of the earth.

And yet, one look at Rosa and it all came back. The late-night poker games that Marco always lost because he couldn't bluff worth a damn. Guard duty with Will, when he would whisper his colorful stories about the traveling circus he'd been in before the Masked Man found him, for her ears only. The moon and the stars, brighter in the mountains than they were anywhere else, and she and Karen would steal into the night just to gaze up at them, as though maybe they, too, could become little lights far away from here. In the dead of night, they had nothing to fear so long as they were together.

"*The night isn't so scary when the things that go bump are on your side.*"

Ivy put a hand over her chest where her two Gym Badges lay pinned under her armor. "It's not about forgetting them," she said softly. "It's

about accepting the truth of who they really are. And no, I don't regret that." She shifted her gaze back to Gary and Ash and Lily. "No matter what happens, I can never regret that."

Rosa averted her gaze and showed Ivy her hard-cut profile. "Then you don't really know what you've given up."

"ChuChu, c'mon! We have to get going, so you can play later, okay?"

Lily's and Ash's Pikachu were chasing each other around the larger Pokémon's feet, much to Aerodactyl's chagrin. Charizard growled low in warning and huffed black smoke, but it made no effort to impede the playful rodents.

"Oh my, I suggest you two keep a close eye on those Pikachu," Oak said. "If you leave them alone for long enough, you just might have a baby Pichu on your hands in a few months' time."

Lily paled. "What? No! ChuChu, we don't have time for your flirting, c'mon!"

Ash cracked a smile, the first one Ivy had seen all morning. "Hey, Pikachu, let's go. You can ride in front this time, buddy."

Pikachu skidded to a halt and perked up, sniffing the air, but it wasn't Ash's promise that caught the little rodent's attention.

"You maggots didn't think y'could fly off without sayin' goo'bye, didya?"

Ash's Pikachu bounded toward the newcomer, who made slow progress in his wheelchair. Pikachu jumped up on his lap, with Lily's Pikachu not far behind. It was Ash's turn to pale.

"Surge," he said, voice cracking.

Ivy covered her mouth to hide her shock.

"Surge!" Ash said again, finding his feet and jogging to the hobbled soldier.

Raichu was plopped down next to him, nearly of a height with him while he sat wrapped up in bandages and casts. Violet pushed his wheelchair, while Sandra and a couple other Vermilion Gym trainers flanked his sides. Ash skidded to a halt just in front of him, tears falling and a bright smile on his face. He reached for Surge, but the

battered Lieutenant protested.

"Hey, watch it! I'm in fuckin' pain here, dumbass."

"You're okay," Ash said, laughing. "Oh my god, you're really okay."

"I'm alive, ain't I?"

"He woke up early this morning," Violet said, also smiling. "The doctors were shocked. Said it was a miracle he'd held on this long, let alone woke up so soon."

Ash wiped his tears and continued to grin like a schoolkid. "You're the dumbass, Surge. I heard you took out about seventy Magnemite. You just had to hog all the glory, huh?"

His face was scabbed where the old electric burns had sizzled his skin and boils had popped, but they were healing under the care of the portable Hyper Potion IV he had strapped to his arm. One of his eyes was completely covered in bandages, while the other was ringed with black bruises. He was gaunter than usual, and sitting down he appeared almost frail next to the hefty Raichu at his side. The war had taken from him.

"Yeah, well, you remember what I told you 'bout survivin'."

"We'll be heading back to Vermilion as soon as possible," Sandra said. "We've been away too long as it is, and the Lieutenant here is eager to get back to work."

"Sandra, you can't be serious. He needs to recover," Violet said.

"Goddamn women, stop naggin' me when I'm right here," Surge grumbled.

Violet fumed. "Listen here, old man, you're gonna stay in Saffron until you can walk out of here on your own two feet or I'll break both your legs, you got that? And don't get any ideas. *I'm* the one directing this wheelchair."

Surge mumbled under his breath, and the visible patches of his face reddened with anger and embarrassment. He did his best to sit up straight and look superior, but it was a hard sell with his many injuries.

"Whatever. Only reason I can't leave now is 'cause I can't sit a Flyer

while I'm in this damned chair. So Sandra, you head back and take care o' the Gym till I return."

"But sir," Sandra protested. "You're the Gym Leader, not me."

"Yeah, and as the Gym Leader, I'm givin' you a direct order. Go run shit till I get back. I bet Bernie's ass's on fire tryna keep everythin' in order without you."

Sandra smiled and blushed just a bit before nodding stiffly. "I would be honored."

Violet put a hand on Surge's shoulder and grinned triumphantly. He scowled, but he didn't shrug her off. "Maybe I'm gettin' too old for this shit."

Ash laughed. "Nah, no way. With all that electricity you redirected, you'll be back in top shape in no time!" His gaze hardened and he held out a hand toward Surge. "And then, when we're done cleaning out Team Rocket, me and Pikachu'll be back for a rematch."

Surge studied him a moment before shakily taking Ash's hand in his own bandaged one. The fingers were bruised and wrapped up, mitten-like, and he couldn't squeeze hard enough to shake properly. "You better be, kid. I'll be waitin' to kick your ass into shape. You still got a lot to learn."

Surge then shifted his bruised eye from Ash to Gary to Ivy, and finally to Lily who'd climbed up into Aerodactyl's saddle.

"You remember what I said, Ash. It ain't about winnin'."

Ash nodded. "I will. I promise."

The rest of them said their goodbyes to Surge and Violet and Sandra, with Ivy hanging back until last. She nodded to Surge and he narrowed his lone eye at her.

"When you see my old pal Giovanni," he whispered, "You kick 'im where the sun don't shine."

"Why not ask Ash to do that?"

Surge snorted. "'Cause that kid ain't got a bad bone in his puny body." He held her gaze, and a chill ran down her spine despite his debilitation. "And it takes one to know one. You get me?"

An image of Sabrina staring up at her in terror as fright sapped the last of her life's blood flickered in her mind. Blinking, she cast a glance askance at the others, and Gary was looking right at her.

"Yeah, I get you."

She mounted up on Crobat's back and tested the stirrups. Rosa, who stood next to Professor Oak, nodded to her briefly, but the gesture went unnoticed by the others.

"Gramps, we'll see you in Cinnabar?" Gary said from his position in front of Lily and Pikachu astride Aerodactyl.

"Yes, the sooner the better. Rosa and I will be making a quick detour to Indigo Plateau to see about Agatha. With any luck, we'll arrive in Cinnabar with the Elite Four themselves backing us up."

"Good. Then we'll see you there."

Gary and Oak shared a brief hug while Ash and Pikachu mounted up on Charizard. Ivy double-checked the Pokéballs at her belt, all accounted for.

"Ready?" Ash said.

"Ready," Ivy said.

"Ready," Gary said.

"Let's fly, Rocky!" Lily said, patting Aerodactyl's hide.

With a squawk, the ancient Pokémon jumped into the sky, catching Gary off-guard momentarily. Ash was quick to follow on Charizard, and Ivy took off last. Oak waved to them from below, but soon he and the rest of the small crowd gathered to see them off shrank from view as Crobat climbed higher. They turned southeast, toward Vermilion and the Sunset Sea beyond, where Fuchsia's jeweled beaches and the last Rocket stronghold in Kanto awaited.

The flight to Fuchsia took three days, and on the third night they finally landed just outside the city. Everyone dismounted and recalled their Pokémon.

"So Lily," Ash said. "You've been here before, right? Think you can remember how to get to the Gym?"

Lily's gaze fell. "No, sorry. Fuchsia's a maze. I don't even think I could find my way to the beach if I kept walking in a straight line."

"Fuchsia was built as a shinobi stronghold," Gary said, chin in hand. "I've heard of their winding roads and false roofs. The whole place is s'posed to look like an optical illusion. Only the locals who already know their way around can actually get anywhere."

"Well, that's just *great*," Ivy said.

"Um, what's that?"

Everyone followed the direction of Lily's pointed finger where a smokestack was rising from somewhere in the middle of the city.

"I bet that's Team Rocket," Ash said.

"No doubt they heard about what happened in Saffron," Gary agreed.

Ivy tossed out a Pokéball and released Umbreon. The black feline was instantly on alert. "Maze or no, Umbreon knows her way around dark places. Let's move."

It took them the better part of twenty minutes to get to the edge of the city proper, and immediately the group recoiled in disgust.

"Ugh, what's that gnarly smell?" Ash said as he covered his nose and mouth with his cap.

"Smells like something died," Lily groused, her ponytail wrapped around her face to blot out the stench.

The two Pikachu chittered at their trainers' shoulders, while Gengar floated overhead, red eyes entranced by the smoke in the distance. Ash shuddered as the Ghost merged with him once more, and without warning he leaped onto the slanting roof of a nearby building about forty feet overhead.

"Hey guys," he called back. "I think the smoke's coming from the Gym."

"What? How do you know that?" Ivy said.

"I can see it better from up here. I can probably jump there, it's a straight shot."

"Well, that's great for *you*, Super Mantine, but the rest of us can't jump

tall buildings in a single bound."

A flash of light illuminated the cobblestone street, and the next thing everyone knew, Lily was climbing into Dodrio's saddle as the dodo's three heads nipped and pecked at each other. Her and Ash's Pikachu both jumped onto Dodrio's back after her, and she nudged the bird with a heel, prompting it to leap high into the air. It landed with a low clack next to Ash, surprisingly graceful for such a large, awkward-looking Pokémon.

"I'll go with you," Lily said. "Dody can't fly, but she can jump higher and farther than any Hitmonlee."

Ash nodded, and Gengar's ghastly cackle echoed around him. "Good. I could use the extra help."

"Are you guys gonna be okay?" Lily turned back to Gary and Ivy.

"We'll be fine," Gary said.

"Just try to stay outta sight," Ivy added. "I've got a really bad feeling about this place."

Gary swallowed and winced at the sour taste in his mouth due to whatever was clogging the air. Ash and Lily took off across the rooftops, doing their best to stay low and land on the roof edges and drainpipes to avoid the clattering shingles. Meanwhile, Gary once more released Aerodactyl from its Pokéball.

"I'm gonna get a better look at the city and the coast," he said. "I've got a bad feeling, too."

Ivy put a hand on his arm, and he tensed without thinking. "Hey, wait, if anyone's flying, it should be me and Batty. You know there's no better Pokémon to have around for a stealth attack at night. Rocky's not exactly hard to miss."

He didn't pull away from her, but he did wince at that godforsaken nickname. "Yeah, but he's the only Flyer that can carry two riders."

Before she could voice her confusion, Gary released another Pokéball. Alakazam materialized from within the transient flash, spoons in hand and ever silent. Its hollow, sunken eyes glanced between Ivy and Gary and, as though it knew what was going on without having to be told, climbed aboard Aerodactyl and settled into the rear seat of the saddle.

Ivy tightened her grip on Gary's arm. "Gary, are you sure you can trust that thing? It was loyal to Sabrina."

"You know, Alakazam was wondering the same thing about you just now."

Next to Ivy, Umbreon hissed in warning, its fur standing on end as yellow eyes glared up at Alakazam. The Psychic returned its gaze but did nothing to react.

"I'm a Delphi," Gary said. "Of course I can trust Alakazam, and so can you."

Her grip was beginning to hurt even through his armor, and his gaze fell to the new armored sleeve and shoulder pad Ivy had taken from the Saffron Gym to replace the ruined left arm. While the rest of her armor was jet black, the new piece was dashed with gold between the joints, a bright but tasteful accent in the style of Saffron's Psychic trainers. It matched Gary's new set, which he'd traded in for the old one soaked through with Golduck's blood. He hadn't even tried to wash out the indelible stains.

As though sensing his discomfort, she released him before he could pull away. "Well, I know you don't give your trust out like candy or anything."

Something in his chest twisted at the look on her face, hidden in shadows and haunted by moonlight. "Ivy... We have a mission. We can't do this now."

"I know." She turned away.

"You know I trust you. I meant what I said. I'm just asking you to trust me now."

Umbreon rubbed against her leg, and she drew two Pokéballs from her belt. "I know you did."

But as she kept her back to him, he wasn't so sure. Houndoom and Wigglytuff appeared from their Pokéballs and surrounded her. Wigglytuff jumped into her arms and climbed up on her shoulder, long ears alert and upright.

"I'll meet you at the Gym," she went on. "Try not to get caught."

She was gone, melted into the darkness before he could reply.

"You, too," he said, though he knew she wouldn't need the encouragement.

Ivy never got caught in the dark.

Ivy kept to the shadows, which was hardly necessary at this time of night. Fuchsia was built like a marauder's maze, a labyrinth of twists and turns only thieves dreamed of. She could have gotten blissfully lost here, and maybe many had, returned to the shadows whence they came once their dastardly deeds were done.

With Umbreon's eyes, Houndoom's nose, and Wigglytuff's keen ears, Ivy jogged down alleys and sidestreets without looking back, trusting her Pokémon to pick up on any danger before she could. Her eyes watered with the stinging stench afoul in the air, and not for the first time she wondered if that, too, was Team Rocket's fault in some way. It was like a sewer pipe had burst and flooded the city with its searching miasma, leaving not even the narrowest corridor free from its invisible stalking. The others had the right idea taking to higher grounds where the reek couldn't reach them, yet someone had to remain down in the bowels of Fuchsia. That was where Team Rocket would be.

Ivy stole past houses large and small, though non taller than three stories or so. Still, their many windows suggested hidden floors within, an optical impossibility for the outsider looking in, but a clever use of space behind the dwellings' wooden walls. Even the homes here were full of secrets.

My kind of town, she thought bitterly.

A human scream pierced the air only briefly before being silenced, and Ivy and her Pokémon froze. Wigglytuff's ears twitched about, and Houndoom growled low in its throat. She put a hand on its horned head to quiet the canine and crept forward. Around the corner, she found the source of the scream she'd heard. A woman lay bleeding out in the middle of the street, clutching her belly and trembling. When she spotted Ivy, she sucked in a breath.

"H-Help..."

Ivy approached, and Houndoom snarled. Umbreon stalked down the length of the woman and curled back its lips in disgust. Ivy drew a knife and moved to help the woman, but the red 'R' stitched into her shirt stayed her hand. In a flash, Ivy was on the ground with her knife

pressed to the woman's throat. Wigglytuff hopped down off her shoulder and stayed close by, ears twitching and eyes wide.

"Team Rocket," she spat. "So the fighting *has* started here. Where're the rest of you?"

"Y-You're not..."

"No, I'm not one of you. But I can end your suffering if you talk."

The woman shuddered. "Too late. It's too late."

Her eyes were dilated, half mad with pain and blood loss. Soon her ability to speak would be completely gone. Whoever had stabbed her had hit a vital organ, but not vital enough for an instant death. It was a cruel way to go.

"*You violated her."*

Umbreon was beside her, teeth bared, while Houndoom salivated and stalked the woman's other side. Ivy's hand remained steady, though. It was always steady.

"Then go to sleep," she said softly.

The knife slid across the Rocket's throat without resistance, as clean as slicing through butter. She was dead before the blade cleared her skin. Ivy wiped the blade on the woman's shirt, but before she could stand up, Wigglytuff squealed a high-pitched scream, and Ivy whirled on her hands and feet.

They were so quiet, it was a miracle Wigglytuff had heard them at all when neither Houndoom nor Umbreon picked up on them. A group of eight or nine people bearing katana, chokutō, and kunai had her surrounded. Their steel glinted in the moonlight with the promise of pain and precision jabs. Their faces were half hidden, obscured behind thick, cloth masks wrapped around the lower halves of their faces, and bandanas covered their hair. Ivy caught a glimpse Pokéballs at a few of their waists, but not many. It was their steel that made her wary.

They said nothing.

Houndoom and Umbreon abandoned their perusal of the Rocket woman's body and flanked Ivy, snarling and growling. A tense silence passed as the enemies brandished their weapons. Glass shattering somewhere in the vicinity broke the moment, and someone unleashed

a hail of kunai.

"Protect!" Ivy shouted as she drew two more knives from holsters on her thighs.

Wigglytuff inflated to twice Ivy's height on all sides just in time to catch the flying kunai and send them ricocheting harmlessly off its thick, rubbery hide. Umbreon took off at blinding speed and weaved in between the attackers with a blurring Double Team attack while Ivy got to her feet but stayed low near Houndoom.

"Feint Attack!"

Umbreon trailed a thick, black fog that slammed into three of the attackers, causing them to fall and cry out at the phantom pain in their legs rendering them paralyzed as it drained their vitality. But the others were quick, and their reflexes and training were just enough to outmaneuver Umbreon once they'd seen what it did to their comrades.

They came at Ivy in waves, two or three at a time, never giving her a chance to breathe and assess their movements. One moment she was parrying a katana, and the very next she was forced to roll to avoid impalement from behind. But every time she swung around to fight back, the attackers faded into the shadows only to be replaced by their comrades from different angles. She could see them as they tried to hide, and it was her only saving grace.

Aside from Houndoom.

"Flamethrower!" she bit out.

The devilish canine spewed molten fire, banishing the shadows and nearly roasting one of the enemy. It was enough time for Ivy to regroup and throw one of her knives. The enemies were quick, though, and her intended target only took a graze to the left thigh. He grunted in pain and retreated, but others were ready to step in for him. One of them released a slimy Grimer that pooled and undulated as it rolled over itself to get to Ivy. Unwilling to risk any poisoning to her Pokémon or herself, Ivy fell back and reached for Wigglytuff.

"Blast it!"

Wigglytuff, shrunk back to its normal size, leaped into the air and began to glow with a soft, pink light. Before Ivy could question the strange reaction she'd never seen before, it opened its mouth wide and unleashed a dazzling beam of light, so pale and pink it was nearly

white, at Grimer and the human attackers behind it. Grimer reared up in a wave of sludge to protect its trainer and take the blast head on, swallowing it whole until it pierced through the other side of it. But it was enough time for the human attackers to scatter out of the danger zone, and the blast crashed into a building wall, splintering wood and ripping a hole into the dwelling.

"The hell?" Ivy said as Wigglytuff landed on the ground, still glowing.

That was no Hyper Beam.

"Stop!"

A woman's voice cut through the night like the kunai that had almost cut down Ivy earlier. The masked attackers instantly pulled back and settled behind Grimer, who was somehow okay despite Wigglytuff's power attack. The little slimeball had congealed into one mass, its droopy eyes looking in two directions as its trainer, one of the nondescript attackers, kneeled by its side.

Umbreon crouched low in front of Ivy next to Wigglytuff as the *shloop, shloop, shloop* of bladed feet approached from the western alley. A monstrous Ariados appeared dripping venom from its fangs that burned through the cobblestone, its many eyes blank and black and all-seeing. For a brief moment, Ivy was frozen with fear as memories of the last time she'd faced the arachnid species returned to her after so long. But this Ariados came to a halt a respectable distance from her, and it bore a rider on its back. The lithe figure, a woman judging from her voice, slipped off the spider's bare back and patted its swollen abdomen appreciatively.

Ivy's attackers took a knee and crossed arms over chests, heads bowed.

"My Lady," they mumbled.

"Who're you?" Ivy demanded.

The newcomer eyed her with an air of boredom that nevertheless cut deep, belying her intense scrutiny. Violet eyes reflected the moonlight overhead despite the dark clouds gathering, like they summoned the light to them.

"You mean, you don't recognize me?" she said.

Ivy frowned and held out a hand for Houndoom, just in case. "I don't like masks."

The woman's eyes crinkled a little as she smiled behind her mask, identical to the other warriors'. Ariados clicked its fangs, an unsettling tune that drew shivers up Ivy's spine.

"Messor," the woman said. "Only a true Reaper could have survived my shinobi's attacks in the dead of night."

"Who *are* you?" Ivy demanded again.

The woman laughed lightly and reached for the button holding her mask in place. She released it, revealing a youthful face, too youthful. She was but a girl, freckled and doe-eyed, but with a smirk so sharp it was like looking at chiseled marble.

"I'm Veleno. I told you once."

"Veleno..."

A Poison Tamer. She knew that word from somewhere. But before Ivy could put the pieces together, the girl was suddenly standing right in front of her. Silent as the night and swift as the wind, Ivy hadn't seen her coming for the life of her. The girl held a kunai, hilt first, over Ivy's chest, but the message was clear. Ivy swallowed.

"Janine?"

Janine grinned. "So you remembered after all. I'm flattered."

"My Lady," one of Ivy's shinobi attackers said. "You know this woman?"

Janine didn't bother looking back at the speaker and instead held Ivy's gaze. "It's all right, Yaiba. I saved her Houndour once. Well, Houndoom now, from the looks of it. She's not with Team Rocket."

The shinobi called Yaiba lowered his head again. He was the Grimer's trainer, and the sludge Pokémon rippled next to him.

"Then I take it you're not with Team Rocket, either," Ivy said carefully.

Janine laughed. "Hell no. I'm Fuchsia, and these are my shinobi. We've been waiting for years for the right time to kick Team Rocket out of this place, and the Siege of Saffron seemed like the golden opportunity. I hear I have you to thank for that."

"Why should I believe you? I heard from Sabrina directly that Fuchsia's a Rocket stronghold. How do I know you're really against

them?"

"I did help you once, you know." She glanced meaningfully at Houndoom. "Does that sound like a Team Rocket thing to do?"

"Do I look like the kind of person who would question the depths of Team Rocket's depravity? Nothing surprises me, believe me."

Janine laughed again. "I like you. You know, Messor and Veleno have always gotten along. We work well together." She gestured to her shinobi warriors. "You can see why."

"Well, forgive me if I'm not in an understanding mood after being attacked. Give me one good reason to trust you."

"You don't have to trust me. Just trust that I want Team Rocket gone from my city. I wanted to be certain you were Messor because I knew you could help. After I heard about what you did in Saffron, I knew it was just a matter time before you came here. I've been waiting for you."

The shinobi had attacked her, but then, so had plenty of other would-be allies in the past. They weren't fighting her now, and Janine had saved Houndour's life in Lavender Town. In any case, they were no friends of Team Rocket judging from the state of the Rocket Agent Ivy had found. She sheathed her knife and stood up straight.

"Okay, fine. I'll bite. I thought Team Rocket would be scrambling when we got here, but it sounds like the fight's almost over. Care to explain that?"

"Not quite. The Admin here was called away, and most of Team Rocket's forces fled once they heard Sabrina was dead. My men and I launched a coup in the chaos, and the rest is what you see. There's just one thing left to do."

"What's that?"

"My father, Koga." Janine's expression darkened. "He has to die."

Lily leaped after Ash astride Dodrio, marveling at his agility and power. The Tamer phenomenon was still new to her, but Ivy had given her a crash course on the trio's journey thus far and all they had learned about Tamer classes, Gym Leaders, and Team Rocket. Out of all of them, Ash's abilities intrigued Lily the most. She wondered what

it would be like to merge with a Pokémon, channel its powers herself. She supposed she would never know, but watching Ash wear a Ghost's skin was a thrill in and of itself, and she thanked whatever gods were listening that he was on her side.

Fuchsia looked different from up here on the rooftops. It was easier to follow, but one look down and Lily was dizzy tracing the winding roads that led to everywhere and nowhere at once. Whoever had designed the city's layout was either a genius or an asshole. Maybe both. The two Pikachu squeaked at Lily's back, and she looked up to see what had caught their attention. A dark shadow soared high above, larger than any bird she could name, and it circled the city in a lazy arc toward the coast. The Gym was just ahead, and Ash announced as much.

Lily reined in Dodrio as they landed on the building adjacent to the Gym. Ash held out an arm for his Pikachu, and the yellow rodent happily obliged. The smoke they'd seen earlier was coming from the building just beyond the Gym, and it billowed white.

"The fire's out," Ash said. "Maybe it was a distraction?"

"Whatever it was, it was easy to spot," Lily said. She slipped off Dodrio and patted the large bird, smiling up at it. After thanking it, she recalled it to its Pokéball. "I think we should try to be quiet from here on out. I feel like even talking is too loud."

It was too loud. The entire city was a dead zone, nearly silent but for the few natural sounds of the sea in the distance, the breeze, and their breathing. There were few lights on, and only the moon above offered any guidance.

"Yeah," Ash agreed. He reached for a Pokéball and released a large Bug Pokémon.

"Oh, you have a Butterfree!" Lily whispered as the winged insect fluttered next to Ash.

"I'm not great at being quiet, but Butterfree's never let me down."

Lily held her arm out for the Bug, and Butterfree gratefully assumed a perch on her offered limb. Its compound eyes glittered in the moonlight and reflected a thousand colors.

"Wow, it's so beautiful," Lily said. "Like a rainbow."

Ash put up his hands. "Hey, so um, you know, nicknames're cool and all, but 'Rainbow' seems kinda, I dunno..."

"Hm? Oh, no. Nicknames are s'posed to shorten the names. Rainbow's too long."

Ash visibly relaxed.

"I think Bebe's a much better name. What d'you think, Bebe?"

Lily gingerly touched Butterfree on the head, and the Bug fluttered its wings to balance itself. Ash sighed.

"Well, I guess it could be worse..."

"What'd you say, Ash?"

"Uh, nothing."

The two Pikachu took up position in between them, sparking and ready for action.

"By the way," Lily said. "I started calling your Pikachu 'Pika' to stop confusing him with ChuChu. I mean, in my head, mostly, or when I talk about him to ChuChu. When I just say 'Pikachu', I could be talking to anyone, you know? Well, not *any*one, I mean, just Pika and ChuChu. Um...I hope that's okay?"

Pikachu perked up at the nickname and twitched its ears. Ash looked between his Pikachu and Lily, whose expression was now as determined as ever as she crouched with Butterfree, all joking aside, ready to jump down and infiltrate the Gym from above. In the moonlight, her profile was soft and shadowed. Amber eyes smoldered, subdued in the night but still brilliant against her winged, red aura. Something about her presence brought him a shred of comfort in the face of what was to come, of everything that had gone wrong up until this point. There was a sense of weightlessness about her that had nothing to do with Gengar's spectral Aura surrounding him, a catharsis he hadn't known in a very long time. His expression softened at the unimaginative nickname she'd picked for Pikachu.

"Yeah, of course it's okay."

"So, what's the plan?"

He shrugged. "I thought we'd improvise. Surprise 'em, you know?"

Lily's lips thinned to a grim line. "I do like surprises."

They were standing on the Gym's roof now over the open-air arena. Sand and geodes lay a couple stories below, which Lily remembered from her brief stint as a captive here. Ash's hand in hers startled her a little. It was cold.

"Hang on. I can get us down there in one piece."

"Okay."

With Butterfree on one hand and Ash holding the other, Lily jumped down into the heart of the Gym and landed lightly in the sand with a soft *swoosh*. Butterfree floated over her head and drifted among the shadows, silent as a wraith. Ash signaled for it to keep to the walls, where the shadows escaped the moonlight, and the Bug drifted on invisible winds to obey. But no sooner had the duo landed and made for the rooms when Ash yanked Lily back by the arm.

She turned back to him, but he was already reaching with a phantom-cloaked arm. Gaseous claws ripped through the air as Gengar burst out laughing. The Shadow Claw tore through a dark-clad figure that had snuck up on them from the shadows. He convulsed, and his eyes rolled back in his head. He clutched at his chest, where Gengar had slashed him, and his clothes began to burn as though touched by acid. But the skin underneath remained intact even as it turned a sickly black in the shape of claw marks. He fell to his knees in the sand, helpless to stop the white, smoke-like substance that escaped the Shadow Claw marks. He was dead before his head hit the ground.

"Intruders!" someone shouted.

"They must not interfere with the Master!"

More shadowy figures materialized from the shadows, or maybe they were the shadows themselves. Lily had never seen anyone move like they did, one with the darkness, and so fast.

"You know, I think we really did surprise them!"

"Whirlwind!" Ash bit out.

Butterfree kicked up a vicious vortex that drew up sand and wind alike, and Lily ducked down behind a geode. It was almost impossible to see in the dark, but the moon offered just enough light amidst the confusion to get an idea. She glanced down at her Pikachu, who was

glowing faintly with electricity and trembling in anticipation.

"That's it," she said, shielding her eyes from the impromptu sandstorm. "ChuChu! Charge and dash!"

Pikachu took off at lightning speed in a Double Team, charging power as it went. The resulting glow created a moving light bulb that illuminated the darker areas of the Gym and flushed out their attackers. Ash picked up on what she was doing and grinned.

"You too, Pika! And keep it up!"

Both Pikachu zigzagged about the Gym's arena and up and down the corridors leading away from it in the four cardinal directions. They were so fast and small that their bright streaks left diffuse light in their wake, a mirage that lingered just long enough to shed light on the area. There was nowhere left for the attackers to hide.

"Blast these sons of bitches!"

Ash's Blastoise appeared within a flash of light, as big as any of the glittering geodes placed about the rock garden arena, and hunkered down for a powerful water attack that smashed into the southern corridor and rained water down on the arena, soaking it. But the enemies were quick and nimble, and they were armed to the teeth.

One of them had managed to get behind Ash and Lily and came at them with a katana. He caught Ash in the arm, and if not for Gengar's heightened senses, he may have lopped it off. Steel sparked against Ash's armor, and the attacker's blade drew a gash along his cheek as he pulled back just a fraction of a second too late.

"Nauty! Mud Shot!"

Just as Ash's attacker cleared his arc and tried to roll with his own momentum, the wet sand left over from Blastoise's attack shot up from the ground and slammed into his side in the form of a thick, brown wave. Clad in only studded leather for ease of movement at the cost of physical protection, the Mud Shot pummeled him like a rag doll and he went flying with a grunt. Omastar landed in the sand, having retracted into its thorny shell, and poked its eyestalks out to look around.

"Wait, these guys don't look like Team Rocket!" Ash said.

Their uniforms were all wrong. They bore no red 'R' insignia, and they

moved like trained assassins, like ninja. Lily gritted her teeth. She'd been separated from Ash by several yards in the commotion.

"No, but Sabrina said Team Rocket controlled the Gym and the Gym Leader, right? So it's the same thing!"

"Actually, it's the other way around," a booming voice cut through the darkness. "It's *I* who control *them*!"

A man dressed similarly to the other ninja attackers emerged from the shadows. He was flanked by a massive Arbok and an oozing Muk, and he tossed another Pokéball just as Lily and Ash caught sight of him.

"Silver Wind!" Ash said.

Butterfree took to the skies and flapped its delicate wings in a devastating aerial attack. Silvery mist swirled in the wind and headed straight for the newcomer, but another air-based attack cut through it and sent the mist scattering, harmless. A great, purple moth hovered in the air just in front of the newcomer, every bit as silent and light as Butterfree, and just as deadly.

"Clever tactic infiltrating with a Butterfree. They're hard to spot unless you know where to look," the man said. "But Venomoth is more than a match for your little butterfly. Toxic!"

Venomoth took off with alarming speed toward Butterfree, shedding poisonous powder in its wake. The two Bugs began an aerial precision battle, fluttering in and out of the shadows, and Ash barely had time to avoid the falling poison to give Butterfree a command.

"Who the hell're you?" Lily demanded. "Team Rocket?"

"I am Koga," the man said. "Team Rocket, Fuchsia, the Shadow Shinobi... I have many affiliations. But tonight, my loyalties lie with myself. I'd love to stay and entertain you all, but you've come at a rather inconvenient time." He waved his hand and the other shinobi moved to attack. "Kill them."

"Oh shi—"

Ash got cut off as a shinobi attacker came at him with twin daggers poised to kill. Koga's Arbok reared back and spat out a curdling Gunk Shot, and Venomoth continued to rain poison down from above. Everything happened so fast, and Lily was too slow. Luckily, his Pikachu wasn't.

A Thunderbolt cracked and lit up the night sky for the blink of an eye and hit the sand in between Ash and his assailant. Fulgurite blossomed like searching fingers greedy for more light, and it was enough to distract Ash's attacker long enough for Ash to jump. Gengar emerged from his back and, grinning down at the disoriented kunoichi, took a deep breath and spat out a thick Shadow Ball that hit her in the chest, impervious to her crossed daggers in a last ditch attempt to block the otherworldly attack. She convulsed and dropped her weapons and dug her nails into her own face. Black tar leaked from the corners of her mouth and mixed with her blood as she tore at her soft cheeks under her mask and screamed.

"Spikes!" Lily shouted, tearing her eyes away from the grisly scene.

Omastar shot into the air and unleashed a hail of Spikes at Arbok, dispelling its Gunk Shot just enough to scatter it into diluted globules. She turned her back and covered her head just as a few of them hit her armor and sizzled, but the Brigandine's segmented scales remained solid and didn't dissolve even as the poison warmed her back with acidic heat.

Both Pikachu had abandoned their flashlight strategy to rejoin their trainers, and not a moment too soon. Koga's Muk was beginning to advance, slow but lethal as it left a charred, smoking trail in the sand where its sludge putrified the sand. Ash had retrieved the fallen kunoichi's daggers and was now doing his best to fight off several more of Koga's shinobi with Pikachu's, Blastoise's, and Gengar's help. But Lily had no such combat training, and she looked hesitantly between the advancing Muk, Arbok, and a few other shinobi while Koga made a break for the rafters, intending to climb out the skylight and escape. Omastar and her Pikachu gathered at her back and awaited her command, but there was little they could possibly do against an enemy like Muk.

Arbok hissed and shot forward, fangs bared, while Muk boiled and reared up, intending to crash down on Lily and Ash beyond her like a great tidal wave.

"Thunderbolt!" she shouted, pointing at Koga.

Pikachu exploded with light and cut a jagged line through the air. The shaft of light splintered the rafters where Koga was climbing up, and he swore as he leaped to safety several yards down. Muk's gaping eyes slowly rolled over its head as it turned its attention to its threatened trainer, and it was all the distraction Lily needed.

"Gyro Ball!"

Omastar retracted into its shell again and rolled across the damp sand, gaining traction thanks to the spikes on its shell. It zigzagged faster and faster until its momentum lifted it into the air, where it began to glow with a steely, pearlescent sheen. Muk was too slow to avoid it, and Omastar blasted clean through the large blob, blowing a hole through its middle. But it kept going after the faster Arbok.

"Thunderbolt!"

Pikachu fired off another lightning attack that spooked Arbok and stayed its course just long enough for Omastar to catch up and smack it in the back of its hood. Arbok screeched and toppled, nearly crushing a pair of shinobi that were jabbing at Ash. They abandoned their attack to jump to safety and gave Ash an opening.

"Whirlwind!" he shouted.

Butterfree spread its painted wings and pulled away from Venomoth just long enough to blast it back. The fearsome vortex kicked up sand and Venomoth's own poison scales, the wind sharp and fast enough to cut through the moth's delicate wings and draw gashes in its hairy carapace with the sand Butterfree kicked up.

"Look out!" Lily said, jumping toward Ash.

One of the shinobi attackers lunged for Ash with a kunai in hand aimed at his neck, and Ash was too slow to avoid it. Lily's throat clenched as she opened her mouth in a scream, but the clang of steel knocked the kunai out of the shinobi's hand and sliced his palm open. He crouched down to avoid whatever had attacked him, but another flying dagger hit him square in the forehead, killing him instantly.

"Stop right there!" a woman bellowed.

More shinobi poured into the arena, but a familiar face was among them.

"Ivy!"

Ivy retrieved her throwing knife from the dead shinobi's forehead. "Miss me?"

Muk had managed to reform by then and rolled with alarming celerity toward Ivy, but another equally massive sludge blob appeared in a

flash of light in front of it. The two Muk crashed together and rained venom across the arena.

"Get down!"

Ash yanked Ivy to the ground just as the toxic rain crashed down upon them. Their armor caught most of it, but the exposed skin on their faces and neck smoked and bubbled on contact. Ash cried out in pain and Ivy clutched the back of her neck, where the poison trickled down her spine under her clothes.

"No!" Lily ran to them, dodging smoking piles of sludge as she went.

"Janine, you disappoint me," Koga said, now grounded on the arena behind his Arbok. "As usual, your nearsighted ignorance holds you back from the truth—that I always get what I want."

"No, Father," the girl who'd charged in before said. "You disappoint *me*. You betrayed Fuchsia, our Shinobi Way, and *me*. And now, you'll die."

A hulking Ariados screeched next to Janine and pawed at the ground, thirsty for blood, but Lily could think only of her friends in that moment. She leaned over them as they writhed together on the sand, their Pokémon gathered round.

"No, please," she sniffled. "You guys're gonna be okay, okay? Okay?!"

Ash rolled onto his side and began to vomit. Ivy had gone clammy, and her eyes dilated. The shinobi Janine had brought seemed to be fending off Koga's forces for the time being, giving Lily a chance to think.

Think! You're a genius, so think!

Shinobi lay dead all around her, so she scrambled to the nearest one and searched him. "C'mon, c'mon! This is a Poison Gym, you gotta have some!"

She checked three, five, eight shinobi, but there were no Antidotes to be found. Meanwhile, Janine and Ariados were busy attacking Arbok, but Koga had other plans as he drew his final Pokéball.

"This madness is done, and so is Fuchsia. I would've welcomed you, but I don't forgive traitors and whores. So die here with the rest of your lot!"

Koga threw his last Pokéball, revealing a mean-looking Crobat with a saddle strapped to its back. He jumped onto its back, and the huge bat screeched. It was in the air in a heartbeat, and it left a parting Air Slash in its wake that cut through one of the sparkling, magenta geodes and sent it hurtling straight for Janine.

Ariados spat out a thick, sticky web that caught Janine in the back and yanked her out of the boulder's path just as it was about to run her over. The battling Muk were not so lucky, and the geode chunk barrelled straight through them.

"No!" Janine freed herself from Ariados's web to go after Koga, but it was too late. He was lifting out of the Gym in a vertical ascent aboard Crobat. "Damnit, no! Get back here and face me, you coward!"

"Gary," Ivy whispered, shuddering.

Lily skidded in the sand and held up her head. "Ivy! Can you hear me?"

"Gary," she said again, eyes skyward.

Lily frowned, shaking her head, but when she looked up, she caught a glimpse of the huge shadow she'd seen earlier passing in front of the moon among the gathering storm clouds. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Eyes wide, Lily looked back down.

"I have to worry about you and Ash right now."

"Someone get me a Flyer!" Janine barked.

She caught sight of Lily hunched over Ash and Ivy and headed straight for them. The two Pikachu placed themselves in front of her, blocking her path and sparking.

"Whoa," Janine said, reaching for the nunchucks at her hip.

"My Lady," one of the shinobi said as he caught up to Janine. "Yoshin's Golbat was injured in the coup earlier. We don't have any Flyers that can lift a human rider here."

Janine made a sour face, her violet eyes shifting from Ash to Ivy to Lily. "All for nothing," she bit out. "He got away, and it was all for nothing."

Lily quickly put two and two together. "You called Koga 'Father', but

you fought against him. Then you must be a Poison Tamer, too! You have to help Ash and Ivy!"

"*I* have to go after that lying traitor."

"We got that covered already, trust me. Now help them, or you'll have a lot more to deal with than just a few ninjas."

Janine narrowed her eyes at the threat and hesitated a moment.

"My Lady," the shinobi said. "We have no way of pursuing Koga at this time."

"He won't get away. Not with Gary still out there."

This struck a chord of familiarity in Janine's unsettling eyes. "The Delphi..." She strode to where Lily was crouched and removed her gloves. Her left hand's nails were rotted purple, but the ones on the right were white. "Move. We don't have much time."

"What're you gonna do?"

Janine began unfastening the black shell armor around Ivy's neck and shoulders to get to the zipper on her jumpsuit underneath. "Whatever I can."

Lily's hands shook and she clenched her fists. Hot tears streamed down her face, but there was nothing she could do. She, too, had no Flyer and no means to help Ash and Ivy. Butterfree alighted on her head and folded its wings, exhausted from the night's exertion. Its weight was negligible, but a small comfort nonetheless. Amber eyes blinked away her tears as Lily watched Janine work on Ivy and Ash.

Please be okay, she pleaded.

Ivy's glazed eyes saw nothing as they watched the dark sky, now almost completely shrouded in thunderclouds, searching. The rain began to fall in thick drops, slowly at first, but it soon dumped on the open-air Gym.

"Gary," she whispered, unseeing and unhearing, lost to the venom.

FYI, I'm perfectly aware that Wigglytuff doesn't naturally learn Moonblast, but I think that's utter bullshit considering Clefable learns it. Yeah, Wigglytuff is only half Fairy, but Wigglytuff and Clefable have always been

a duo since Genwun. So this is my tiny rebellion against Game Freak's weird logic.

19. Fuchsia City, Part 2

Triumvirate, chapter 19: Fuchsia City, Part 2
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

The rain fell all of a sudden, unbidden and almost without warning, and the moonlight disappeared behind its hazy curtain. Soon, Gary and Alakazam were soaked to the bone and plunged into darkness as they soared over Fuchsia's jeweled coast. Aerodactyl squawked, but it didn't mind the water. For a Rock-type Pokémon, the winged reptile had always had a strange affinity for water, another anomaly to make note of in the Pokédex for his grandfather's review.

Despite the inky darkness and the torrential rains, Alakazam's sight allowed Gary to see Fuchsia's sprawling expanse below and miles out to sea. Or rather, feel it. The earth, the people and Pokémon walking it, and even the wood and stone that comprised the buildings below all teemed with natural energy that glowed in his third eye. Even the rain drops glimmered faintly with power, dim as it was, like falling stars that together blended into a vast, scintillating sheet of light. He'd never seen the world in such stark relief, not even through Espeon's sight. The Psychic behind him was ever silent, and Gary didn't need to face it to know its thoughts.

Sabrina had trained it well.

Is this really how she saw the world?

A ringing in his head, like a clear bell, gave him the answer as though he'd known it all along.

Yes, it seemed to say. What other way is there?

Alakazam knew his thoughts before he did, and Gary in turn saw the world through its eyes before he could see it himself. Ash had once tried to explain the empathic connection he had with Gengar, but this was far more profound, more invasive than what he'd described. There was no telling where Gary ended and Alakazam began as they flew together high over Fuchsia City, the world at their feet.

A bright, indigo light shot from the Gym straight into the sky all of a sudden, and Gary made out two energies—a Crobat and its rider. He recognized the huge bat from watching Ivy with it countless times before. But that wasn't Ivy riding it now.

Aerodactyl passed over the Gym, and Gary picked out Ash, Ivy, and Lily all gathered in the arena, unmoving while other unnamed figures scrambled about them. No one was going after the man on the Crobat, and he was flying north out of Fuchsia.

The Gym Leader?

Veleno.

The thought, not his own, echoed in his head, and he remembered Ivy's warning about the Fuchsia Gym Leader, the Veleno who'd sided with Team Rocket.

Fly, Gary commanded.

Aerodactyl flapped its leathery wings and shot forward at high speed toward the fleeing Crobat, but the bat was too fast to catch.

"Let's see what you can do, Alakazam," he said, knowing the Psychic would hear him even over the roaring rain.

Alakazam raised its arms, and the spoons in its hands began to glow, charging power. After a couple seconds, it unleashed a thick bolt of silvery, telekinetic energy that arced like a lightning bolt after Crobat. The huge bat sensed the attack at the last minute and dived, but the Psychic attack grazed one of its hind wings and bent the limb out of shape, cracking bone and shriveling flesh. The light from the blow illuminated the rider's face, a middle-aged man dressed in black with a mask over the lower half of his face and furious, violet eyes that found Gary through the haze of rain. Lightning cracked overhead, and the rider—Koga, undoubtedly—steered Crobat into a swoop.

The battle began.

Ancient Power, Gary commanded.

Aerodactyl's scales shone with orange light, and it turned in midair to direct the attack at Crobat. Sentient shale shards zipped toward Crobat and Koga, slicing through the falling rain. But Crobat was agile, even injured, and it shot toward Gary in a spinning attack, narrowly missing the Ancient Power attack.

Gary pushed down on Aerodactyl's saddle and turned the behemoth Flyer in a dive, but Crobat was on them in a flash.

"Sludge Bomb!" Koga's voice rang out over the storm.

Lightning flashed and thunder cracked, and acid rained down on Gary and his Pokémon. He put up a hand to shield his head, but a yellow, wondrous light bloomed from his fingertips and caught the acid rain. Alakazam threw up a Light Screen that covered Aerodactyl and its riders like an umbrella, catching most of the sludge before it could do much damage. Aerodactyl screeched in anger as some of the poison fizzled on its scales. Its tough hide could withstand a little poison, but another direct hit would be the end of it.

"Delphi!" Koga spat. "I'll enjoy killing you!"

Aerodactyl dived, and Crobat dived after it. Alakazam fired off Psybeam after Psybeam while Gary focused on staying out of Crobat's direct line of fire. The bat was impossibly fast, able to swerve and dip on a mere whim, while Aerodactyl's bulk offered no such flexibility. Alakazam's attacks missed their mark as it battled the inclement weather, Aerodactyl's erratic swerving, and Crobat's extraordinary agility.

"Come on!" Gary said through gritted teeth as each of Alakazam's attacks missed by ever wider margins and Crobat closed in again.

Koga himself threw kunai and shuriken, and Alakazam abandoned its offensive to protect itself and Gary from the sharp projectiles. Gary barely had time to duck as he sensed one of the knives sneak past Alakazam's Reflect barrier and graze him in the side of the neck. He hissed and clutched the bleeding wound with a hand, though it wasn't deep enough to cause concern. As long as Crobat and Koga maintained their position behind Gary, there would be no escaping the fastest Flyer in Kanto and Johto.

Lightning flashed again, momentarily blinding, and Koga's relentless shuriken assault stopped briefly as he regained his sight. Alakazam fired off another Psybeam, just narrowly missing Crobat's left wing as the bat ducked to the right.

"That's it," Gary said aloud. He shot a look over his shoulder.

Alakazam raised its right spoon, having already picked up on Gary's line of thinking before he could form coherent thoughts or speech. A flicker of doubt passed through him as he guided Aerodactyl higher, but as before, a wash of cool energy allayed those doubts as quickly as they had come. Unbidden, Gary thought of Sabrina, her face so clear in his mind's eye, in Alakazam's memory.

The dark clouds, pregnant with heavy rain, roiled overhead and

danced with golden energy as they prepared to crack open again.

"Steady." Gary patted Aerodactyl's neck, urging it forward.

"Cross Poison!" Koga shouted.

Crobat screeched and shot forward like a purple bullet, ready to cut into Aerodactyl's tough hide with poisoned wings. The clouds overhead rumbled, and Gary sucked in a breath.

Now!

Lightning flashed in a deadly bolt that spooked both Crobat and Aerodactyl, but Alakazam raised its spoons and pulsated with Psychic energy. Gary's stomach clenched up as it went one way and the rest of him went another, rocketing through time and space on the edge of a thunderbolt. The lightning was gone in an instant, and when Gary resurfaced a moment later from the Teleport, Crobat and Koga cruised in front of him. Aerodactyl faltered at the inexplicable switch-up, and Koga turned back, violet eyes wide with horror as they caught Gary's.

"Psychic!" Gary shouted as he clutched his lurching stomach.

"No!"

Alakazam fired off a devastating, silver wave of light at Crobat's back. But the bat was still one step ahead, even blinded by the lightning, and swerved. It shrieked and unleashed a rippling Supersonic wave that passed unhindered through the Psychic attack and slammed into the disoriented Aerodactyl. At the same time, the Psychic blast hit Crobat in the belly and snapped Koga back in the saddle. The big bat's wings contorted and crunched, and silvery energy sloughed off its hairy skin like a fruit peeler. Thunder rumbled overhead, and the pair fell.

But they didn't fall alone. The Supersonic had hit Aerodactyl dead on, and the ancient reptile jerked back and flailed in its madness. Gary was flung from the saddle while Alakazam remained strapped in. His screams joined Koga's, and nausea was suddenly the least of his worries. Fuchsia's squat buildings and pagodas rushed to meet him as gravity and the merciless rain carried him down, faster and faster, head over heels. Aerodactyl and Alakazam plummeted not far behind as Aerodactyl tried in vain to fight its confusion and remain airborne. The lights of the world faded as Gary lost his connection with Alakazam, and only darkness, cold and wet and dreary, accompanied his fall.

He closed his eyes to the darkness, chilled to the bone. "Ivy," he choked out as rain filled his mouth. Her bright, blue eyes came alive in his mind's eye.

A roar louder than any storm filled his ears as his limbs snapped backward upon impact. He sank, and immediately the smells of sewage and the city inundated his senses, along with the distinct reek of wet animal fur. His head rolled and banged against something arguably soft, but the impact from falling about five hundred feet hit him like a metal bat to the skull. Eyes still squeezed tight, he barely registered the second impact just seconds after the initial one.

"Gary!"

The surface upon which he'd landed rumbled, and meaty claws roughly stood him upright. Head spinning, Gary gasped for air and heaved. But he hadn't drowned like he'd feared, and it wasn't Ivy's face he saw now, fading into darkness. A muzzle bigger around than his head curled back and revealed a row of small, sharp teeth. Beady, black eyes peered down at him, curious.

"Gary! Hey, Gary!"

"Ash?"

Ash bounded toward him, cloaked in Gengar's Aura, and panted. "Fucking hell, man. I leave you alone for a bit, and you almost fall to your death? C'mon."

A low growl rumbled against Gary's back, and he jerked and fell forward in a puddle on his hands and knees. Snorlax pulled itself up from the small crater it had made in the street when it landed and hunkered down on all fours to shake out is shaggy, drenched fur.

"What," Gary panted. "What?"

Ash kneeled down and grinned. "Told you Snorlax would save your sorry ass one day."

Gary looked back at the hulking bear as it plopped down on the street, exacerbating the crater it had made and turning its snout up to the air to catch rain in its mouth. Gary looked up and paled.

"Shit, Aerodactyl!"

"Don't worry, I got it covered," Ash said. "Look."

Venusaur was squatting a short distance away and pumping burst after burst of blue spores into the air. Above, Aerodactyl and Alakazam were tangled up in its many vines on a rooftop, struggling in the throes of madness while the Sleep Powder slowly took effect. Gradually, Aerodactyl fell limp with slumber and drooped, Alakazam along with it. Gary clutched his head in his hands.

"God."

"Where's Koga?" a woman's voice said.

Still wobbly, Gary looked back to see a woman slipping off a truly massive Ariados, larger by far than the ones he'd encountered in Viridian Forest. He flinched at the sight, old memories gripping him in cold hands, but Ash's hand on his shoulder was colder still and steadied him.

"It's cool, that's Janine. She helped us," he explained.

"My Lady," said one of the masked men accompanying her. "Over here."

Janine blew past Gary, and he was more than happy to get out of her and Ariados's ways.

"It appears he fell to his death. Crobat, too."

Ash and Gary made their way to where Janine and her men were looking, and he immediately regretted it. Koga, what was left of him, was spread out on the ground. He was contorted at odd angles, bleeding where his skin had peeled away and curled to reveal raw muscle and bone underneath. Crobat was hardly recognizable in flayed pieces next to him. Neither moved. Janine was silent for a moment as she kneeled down next to Koga's remains.

"Who's responsible for this?" she said.

Gary's hand found the wound on his neck where Koga's shuriken had slashed him. It still bled and stung a little. "I am. I caught him trying to escape, so..."

Janine looked back at him with the same, violet eyes as Koga, wide with terror at the prospect of his inevitable death in those final moments. "The Delphi..."

Understanding dawned with a cold dread as he scanned her face, and

the nausea he'd felt before revisited now with a vengeance. Janine looked away and reached for Koga's shirt, where she fumbled with something pinned to the left breast.

When she rose, she held out her prize to Gary. "Then you should wear the Soul Badge." She held his gaze through the rain that drew tracks down her cheeks and misted her eyes, but the flash of emotion he'd seen earlier was well hidden now behind the mask her shinobi training had carved into her heart and soul. "My father lost the right a long time ago."

Gary's hand moved of its own accord, and Janine dropped the Soul Badge into his gloved palm. It was a fuchsia crystal inlaid with silver and shaped like a heart, exquisitely crafted. The rain continued to beat down on those gathered. Snorlax shook itself out again and yawned, and Ash said something to Gary and gestured vaguely toward the Gym, but Gary didn't hear him. There was only the endless storm, the crack of thunder, and the brief flash of horror in Janine's eyes, the same as Koga's as Gary's face became the last one he ever saw in this world.

The sun rose just two hours after Koga's death, and the rain rose with it. Lily opted to stay up and watch over Ivy, who was still unconscious after her sudden poisoning, and Ash, who'd pushed himself too hard.

"Lily, I'm fine, really! Gengar got ridda most of the poison, see?" He spun once. "Totally fine."

She crossed her arms and glared up at him, resenting the eight or nine inches he had on her for the first time. "Yeah, right. Look at those dark circles under your eyes! You look like a Furret!"

"Furret's a tough Pokémon. And cute, too."

"You're not as cute as Furret."

Ash smirked. "So, you admit you think I'm cute?"

Lily slapped a hand over her mouth and blushed, but her embarrassment soon morphed into anger. "That's not fair! Ugh, just go to sleep already before you pass out on the floor!"

He backed off and removed his cap, which was damp with rainwater. "Sorry, just messin' with you. I do feel kinda gross, actually."

"Well, *yeah*, you were poisoned! That's what I've been trying to tell you!"

That had been about five hours ago, and since then Lily had helped out where she could with some of the Gym repairs. She made sure not to wander too far from the room where Ash and Ivy were sleeping their recovery away. It was more lavish than she would have imagined for a ninja hideout. The floors were hardwood, but unlike the halls, these were not nightingale floors, so her passage was silent and allowed Ivy and Ash to rest undisturbed. Woodblock paintings in the traditional ukiyo-e style adorned the wall and depicted a vast, frothing sea beyond a pale, pink shoreline—a portrait of the Fuchsia coast, captured in perfect spirit.

Janine had done her best to extract the Muk poison from Ivy's system. It was like watching magic, something wholly at odds with everything Lily knew about the human body, toxins, antitoxins, and the like. All with the touch of a hand.

Lily had made sure not to shake Janine's hand or get physically close to her after she'd seen the girl imbue the Muk poison with sentience and lure it out of Ivy's system with her blanched fingers. After seeing what Ash could do up close, there was no sense in fooling around with a Tamer's special abilities, whatever they were.

Yaiba, Janine's right-hand man, brought Lily a small breakfast once Ash had fallen asleep and thanked her on Janine's behalf for the foursome's timely arrival.

"I don't think we would have apprehended Lord Koga if you all hadn't arrived when you did."

Lily smiled up at Yaiba from her place seated on the floor next to a low table. "I'm just glad Team Rocket's gone and everyone's okay."

Yaiba averted his gaze. "We lost many good shinobi and kunoichi in the coup, but yes, in the end victory is what matters most. That, and Lady Janine's life."

"You really care for her."

He frowned behind his mask. "I believe in her. She is a great leader, young as she is. I'm confident Fuchsia City will flourish again under her. And this time without any risk of infestation."

He excused himself to let her eat in peace and get back to his duties,

and Lily found herself picking at her food, not really hungry.

"I wonder what it's like? To have someone who believes in you like that."

A cold draft ruffled her ponytail, and she found Gengar in its physical form frowning down at her rather dramatically. The melancholy Ghost was such an odd sight that she had to giggle.

"You really wear your emotions on your sleeve, huh?"

At the sound of her laughter, Gengar lit up and grinned wolfishly. It jumped up on the table but made no sound when it landed, and then proceeded to observe her food. Lily picked up a hunk of bread and held it out for the Pokémon to examine.

"Do Ghosts even eat?"

Gengar reached for the bread, but its clawed hand passed right through it. Lily laughed again and ate the bread herself as Gengar watched, entranced.

"Say, I know you like to stay with Ash all the time, but you wanna go for a walk with me? I gotta stretch out or I'll fall asleep."

Gengar turned back to Ash, who was squished on a futon in between Pika and ChuChu, Wigglytuff, Umbreon, and Ivy. After debating with itself for a moment, Gengar grinned down at Lily and clapped its gaseous front claws together.

"Okay, but *no tricks*, got it?"

Gengar's face fell, and the air in the room seemed to grow stale.

"*Ghosts're pretty amazing!"*

Lily smiled at the memory. "Okay, fine, but only *little* ones. I dunno about you, but I wonder what all those shinobi look like under those masks."

Disembodied cackling erupted from all corners of the room as Gengar threw its head back and guffawed. The pair walked out of the room and slid the shoji screen closed behind them. Lily winced as the nightingale floors chirped with every step she took, but Gengar had a field day jumping around and stomping on the floors, totally silent. It laughed and laughed as it danced and hopped, like weightlessness was

some great accomplishment instead of its natural state of being.

"Oh, you show off!" Lily attempted to dance around, searching for a break in the nightingale floor, but to little avail. She did, however, manage to make Gengar roll with laughter at her clumsy moves.

They came into the main arena of the Gym, where the sand was mucked up from all the rain and fighting. The tar trail Muk had left in its wake still sat near the middle of the arena, and Lily shivered at the memory. She'd removed her armor in favor of jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, but the memory made her feel a little naked without the extra protection. Yawning, she stretched out and trudged through the sand toward the nearest geode and marveled at the brilliant, violet crystals hidden inside it. They sparkled in the morning sunlight streaming through the open skylight. Gengar was less taken with the rock and more concerned with the person talking to Janine across the arena.

"Gary?"

She hadn't seen him all morning after he and Ash got back to the Gym and Janine announced that Koga was dead, the coup was won, and Fuchsia was finally free of Team Rocket. Curious, she headed for the pair with Gengar in tow.

"Hey, guys," Lily said as she drew up next to them.

"Lily." Janine nodded to her. "How're Ivy and Ash holding up?"

"Still sleeping. Thanks for helping, Janine. I don't think I got a chance to say it before."

"You cured them?" Gary said, voice guarded.

Janine smiled behind her cloth mask. "The perks of being Veleno. We're immune to poison."

"Ash and Ivy aren't."

"It was really incredible," Lily said. "Like she could control the poison and draw it out with her hands. I didn't know a Tamer could do something like that."

Janine's gaze was unreadable as she regarded the two of them. "Veleno say Death has two right hands." She adjusted the fingerless gloves on her hands, one with nails and fingertips dyed purple with rot and the other white and bloodless. "But as shinobi, we believe in

balance. One hand deals death, and the other reins it back in." She paused and folded her hands together. "My father lost sight of that part."

Gary shifted, and Gengar frowned up at him. "Listen, Janine, about Koga—"

"No, please, it's me who should be thanking you for that. When you all arrived, you caught us in the middle of a coup to overthrow Team Rocket's stronghold here. We were going after the usurper, but we didn't know who he was. Not until word of the Siege of Saffron reached us."

"You mean, you didn't know Koga was the boss?" Lily said, incredulous.

Janine laughed bitterly. "I know, sounds ridiculous, right? My own father, and I had no idea. But he is—*was* a master of illusions. A true shinobi, even if he did break the Code for personal gain. I never knew the truth until two days ago, and by then it was too late."

"I'm so sorry," Lily said. "I dunno what I'd do if I found out my father was Team Rocket." She covered her mouth in despair for the younger girl. "Oh no, and you had to see him after he fell. Whatever he did, he was still your father. Janine, I'm so sorry."

Gengar, half invisible, had floated up behind Janine and was trying to pull her hood and mask off, but its shadowy hands kept passing through her harmlessly. Lily was too distracted by the Ghost's antics to notice the way Gary's eyes fell and he clenched his fists.

"We were close once," Janine said softly. "My father and me. He taught me everything I know. I've been fighting a lot of my life, but that's life in Fuchsia. You fight, or you die. We don't tolerate the weak. But to him, I was always just Jany." She blinked and pulled down her mask and hood, revealing a young face and curly, dark hair that clashed with her indigo eyes. Gengar fell back in the sand, defeated. "I guess you never really know the darkness in another person's heart, no matter how good and true they seem. Not until you see it for yourself."

Gary's sudden departure and mumbled half apology startled Lily, and she stared after him as he headed for the Gym's exit. Gengar leaped to its feet and waved its stubby arms after him, but Lily didn't follow and the Ghost looked back at her in question.

"Anyway, I have more of my people to see to," Janine said. "Sorry I

can't be a little more accommodating."

"No, it's okay. Actually, I'd like to help if I can."

"There's a lot to do, and I wouldn't mind the extra hands, to be honest. Cleaning up Koga's mess has been tougher than I thought."

"Well, it's not like you've done this before. What are you, fifteen?"

"Sixteen. People say I look young."

Lily smiled a little. "I have the same problem. But Yaiba really believes in you. I think Fuchsia's gonna be just fine."

Janine blushed a little. "Um, right, well... Anyway, I could use some help with the sewers, if you can stand the stink. Team Rocket was clogging them as a way to hold the freshwater hostage, which is why the whole city reeks. You got any Water-type Pokémon that can blast through, oh, twenty or thirty feet of debris?"

Lily selected Kingdra's Pokéball from her belt. "I bet I can do you one better. Hey Gengar, you wanna come?"

The Ghost frowned up at her, annoyed that its pranks hadn't gone the way it had planned.

"Oh, c'mon, a dank, dark sewer where you can blow up trash doesn't sound like fun to you?"

Like flipping a switch, the Ghost smiled its cheshire smile and burst out laughing as it leaped into the air, half evaporated. Its red eyes glowed with mirth and mischief through the deformed, rotting skull hidden within its gases, and it looked between the masked girl and the woman who'd made its Imago smile after that big fight in the Psychics' nest. It seemed wherever she was, there was a chance to have a little fun. And no Ghost could say no to the dark, spooky fun she was offering now. It followed the two girls out the Gym, silent as it danced across the chirping nightingale floors.

Gary sat in darkness, watching over Ivy in silence. Moonlight from the crescent in the sky and a million twinkling stars cast wan light across her face as she slept. She was lost to night's velvet embrace, and no matter how much he squinted, he couldn't make out more than her silhouette as she breathed deeply. He didn't bother squinting, letting the darkness fill his sight and blind him.

Is this how you see the world?

The room smelled faintly of incense, sharp cinnamon and cardamom softened with jasmine. It lingered in the still air and kept him company in his silent vigil. Ivy had been asleep for days, in a coma as the venom and antitoxins waged war in her body, though Janine assured him she would recover, good as new. This was the second time Gary had stood guard over her as she slept, and he decided he hated it. Darkness was her realm, not his. Darkness was where the monsters dwelled, denizens of a place devoid of light and warmth, lying in wait.

And yet, here he was. Lying in wait as she slept soundly, unawares. In the dark.

"*Don't look at me like that. Not you.*"

Gary slipped off the window sill where he was perched and kneeled down by Ivy's futon. Her hair was splayed across her pillow, a tangled mess but lush and thick, and his fingers ached at the sight of it. He reached for her.

"*You betray your own kind for* this filth*?!*"

He yanked his hand back as though burned and stifled a cry in his throat. Breathing heavily, Gary steadied himself on his rear with his hands on the hardwood floor, shaking and blinking through the darkness. He peered at Ivy's face, soundly sleeping, over and over trying to convince himself it wasn't Sabrina's face he'd seen instead of hers.

"Why is this happening to me?" he whispered, voice cracking.

"*The only way to kill a monster is to send a bigger one after it.*"

Those words had convinced Ivy, for better or for worse, to accept Erika's demand for Sabrina's head. Gary traced the curve of Ivy's cheek with his gaze, her slender neck, her scarred hands where she'd cut herself too many times learning how to throw those knives that never missed their target. And when he closed his eyes, it was Koga's face he saw, eyes wide with horror and disgust. Janine's face, contorted with agony and despair if only for a moment at the knowledge of her father's sudden and savage murder. The Soul Badge was tucked away in his pack, hidden from sight.

Gary rubbed his eyes and lay back on the hardwood floor. Outside the

window, the night was clear and crickets sang in the thickets around the Gym, tireless in their tune. It was hot in here. Stuffy, hard to breathe, and he had to get out. He shot up and threw off his jacket to land in a crumpled heap in the corner. In only jeans and a black T-shirt, he slipped out of the shoji door and pressed himself to the wall as he walked to avoid the worst of the chirping nightingale floors.

Under the open-air skylight of the Fuchsia Gym's main arena, the air was crisp and cleaner than it had been when he'd arrived thanks to Janine's and Lily's efforts cleaning out the sewer blockages. Team Rocket had been holding Fuchsia at knifepoint by withholding their freshwater supply in exchange for fealty, but now the lingering stench in the air was gone, carried off by the sea breeze, and the water flowed freely under the cobblestone streets.

Gary kicked off his shoes and socks and rolled up his jeans to the knee before heading out into the arena. The sand was cool under his bare feet, and he took a small moment for himself to curl his toes in it. Remembering. He tossed out a Pokéball, and Scizor materialized beside him. The Bug stood nearly a foot taller than him and gleamed under the moonlight. Red eyes peered around and its fangs clicked together, tasting the air for danger.

"Hey, buddy," Gary said softly. "Just like old times?"

Scizor inclined its head, and Gary frowned.

"You know what I mean."

The red mantis crouched and brandished its metal pincers at him. Gary mimicked the stance and raised his fists, elbows loose as he balanced on the balls of his feet. He breathed, shoulders relaxed, and lunged. Scizor pulled back to avoid the punch to its neck and whirled around Gary, forcing him to pivot. The sand gave and stole some of his momentum, but like riding a bike, the push and pull came back easy. He sank into his own weight and lunged again, this time lower.

Scizor crouched and smashed its claw against the sand in a feint. Gary threw up his arm to shield his eyes and slid through the falling sand on his side. His bare foot smacked against something cold and smooth, and Scizor hissed. A steely pincer closed around Gary's ankle and yanked him forward until he passed clean under the leaping Bug. Scizor's iron hide gleamed in the moonlight as it soared over him, red eyes wide and alert, and slammed a pincer down at Gary's head. He rolled and grabbed a fistful of sand, which he threw back at Scizor's

face. The mantis let him go, more concerned with the sand blinding its vision, and Gary took the opportunity to stand.

Adrenaline warmed his blood and pumped it faster. A healthy flush dusted his cheeks, and he grinned up at Scizor. "Head first, fists first."

Scizor beat its wings to shake the sand from its joints and peered at Gary, waiting for his next move.

"*They can't both be first, idiot,"* he'd said that day on the beach, sweaty and too tired even to wipe the grime from his forehead.

The other boy grinned knowingly. *"They gotta be,* idiot. *You can't have brains without an iron head to keep 'em safe!"*

Dumbass, he'd thought back then. Back when it was easy to lay insults and dismiss what he wanted simply because he could. In Cianwood, a man was only as good as his two fists. Gary had a good head. That had been his biggest weakness. Men with two fists don't need a head to give permission to pummel whatever stands in their way. But when it came down to ideas versus execution on an island where only tangible results earned him the right to eat and sleep without looking over his shoulder, Gary had learned to wield his own two fists, too.

"*Head first, fists first."*

Ethan's words, so simple in their blissful youth, had ended up saving his chances with Gym Leader Chuck. They'd saved Scizor, too, back when it was still a Scyther facing four-armed behemoths four times its size.

Head first, fists first.

Clairvoyants never raised their fists, just as Sabrina had relied entirely on her Pokémon and her wits to beat Ivy. She would have done it, too, if Gary hadn't intervened.

Scizor leaped high into the air and plummeted toward him, but he dashed backward and sprung off a geode buried in the sand. He reached for Scizor's searching pincer and caught it in his hand, but instead of fighting a losing battle to push it back, he let it graze him and rolled against it. They landed together in the sand with a muffled *whoosh*, Scizor's left claw pinned to the ground and the other poised to strike Gary in the neck. Gary looked up into the large Bug's red eyes, panting a little.

"You need both," he said.

Sabrina didn't have both.

Scizor just watched him, ever silent, and relented to help him up. It lent him an armored claw to catch his breath, but Gary waved it off and resumed his stance.

"Again."

Scizor beat its steel wings and jumped, looking for a new angle.

I have both, Gary thought as he followed his Bug's trajectory.

He rolled just as Scizor collided with the sand and prepared a counterstrike.

Sabrina was dead.

When Ivy finally woke up, the only thought on her mind was that she was so hungry she could hardly remember what food tasted like. She tried to sit up, but something heavy on her chest made it difficult.

"What the— Wigglytuff?"

The pink rabbit was perched on her chest and sniffing her face, indigo eyes wide and curious. Ivy glared up at it.

"Cute as you are, I'm almost hungry enough to find you appetizing unless you get off me."

Wigglytuff just continued to sniff her face, and Ivy broke down and smiled. She scratched the pink rabbit behind the ears and eased it off her chest to sit up. Purring was her only warning when Umbreon leaped up in Wigglytuff's place and butted her shoulder. Ivy laughed and petted the black feline.

"Wow, I must've overslept a lot if you were both waiting for me."

It was then that she noticed she wasn't wearing her armor, but her normal clothes and no shoes. Rubbing her eyes, Ivy tried to remember what had happened. The fight in Fuchsia came back to her, as did her meeting with Janine and the attack on the Gym. And then there were Ash and Lily, and that huge Muk...

"Ivy."

She looked up and found Gary midway through sliding open the shoji with a bowl of food in hand.

"Gary."

They stared at each other a moment in surprise, but the moment soon passed and he let himself inside.

"You were poisoned," he said, taking a seat against the wall with his legs crossed. "You've been sleeping for a couple days. Janine said you'd be fine, but..."

"Janine... Then, the fighting's over?"

He nodded. "We came at the tail end of things."

"Oh."

They lapsed into silence, but it didn't last long when Ivy's stomach rumbled loud enough to scare Wigglytuff. She flushed beet red and clutched her stomach.

"S-Sorry, I'm just hungry."

Gary held out the bowl of food he'd brought with him for her to take. It was steaming and smelled like heaven, and her mouth was already watering so bad she was sure she'd start drooling. Without hesitation, Ivy took the bowl and spoon and dug in with gusto.

"How're you feeling?"

Ivy looked up from her food briefly and nodded. "Better," she said through a mouthful of food.

"That's good."

They lapsed into silence again while Ivy chowed down. In a matter of minutes, she'd eaten the entire bowl and sighed.

"Wow, that hit the spot. Thanks."

"That was actually s'posed to be my lunch."

Before she could stop herself she said, "Aw, and here I thought you were just trying to get on my good side."

When he didn't respond right away, she realized her mistake and

averted her gaze.

"Right...well, I'll just get cleaned up."

"Can I ask you something?"

Gary hadn't moved an inch after he gave her the bowl, and he was looking at her now with an intensity that belied an inner turmoil far deeper than what he let her see. Damn idiot liked to keep his secrets for as much as he berated Ivy for doing the same thing. But she figured now wasn't the time to point it out. Instead, she rose to the bait, curious.

"What's on your mind?"

He watched her a moment, like he couldn't decide which words to use. Ivy bit the inside of her cheek, suddenly nervous.

"How do you do it?" he said.

"Do what?"

"How..." He paused a moment to think. "How're you not afraid of the dark?"

Ivy bit her tongue to keep herself from blurting out the first thing that came to mind. She took a moment to really look at Gary, the stiffness in his back, his set jaw, the thin sheen of perspiration on his brow. His hands were wrung together, white-knuckled.

Scared, she realized. But not of her. She thought about his words and how he'd chosen them so carefully.

"I am afraid," she said. "I've always been afraid of the dark."

He frowned, and his jaw slackened. "What?"

"But I learned how to control my fear. And then I learned how to control the darkness itself. That's something I'll always be proud of."

"Even if it makes you a monster?"

His words, hollow and whispered, nevertheless stung. But she was done hiding behind fear and shame and lies. No more secrets, he'd told her. So be it.

"Especially that." She looked away and pet Umbreon, who purred

louder and licked her hand. "The night isn't so scary when the things that go bump are on your side."

Umbreon gazed up at her with its bright, yellow eyes, and she couldn't help but smile a little. Gary got up and pulled back the shoji screen again.

"I'll let you clean up," he said softly.

He was gone by the time she looked up.

By the end of the day, Ivy was already helping Janine and her shinobi with some of their rebuilding efforts. The foursome planned to head toward Cinnabar in the morning at dawn, so there was time to kill until then. She heard briefly about what had happened with Koga from both Janine and Lily.

"I was stupid," Janine admitted. "I should've seen what my father was up to a long time ago. Maybe I could've stopped him. Maybe I even could've saved him. But I'm glad Gary could do what I was too weak to do. I hate to admit it, but I'm not half the shinobi Koga was."

"I beg to differ," Ivy said. They were at the Pokémon Center retrieving Janine's Muk and waiting for Nurse Joy to return. "You saw through Team Rocket's bullshit. That already makes you a hundred times the shinobi he was."

Nurse Joy returned with Muk's Pokéball, and Janine thanked and paid her for the services. The two women exited the Pokémon Center and headed back to the Gym.

"Maybe." Janine sighed and rested her hands behind her head to look up at the darkening sky. "I hate that I miss him after everything he did to me and this city."

"There you are!" Lily jogged toward them as they approached the Gym with her Pikachu in tow. "Ivy, you think you can fly tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I'm feeling way better. What about you? I heard you've been running around in the sewers working all day."

Lily grinned. "And I got the stink to prove it. Or at least, I did before we got the water running again. I've never loved a shower so much, you know?"

They three women headed into the Gym together, and when the nightingale floors began to chirp, Lily scowled.

"What's the matter?" Ivy asked. "Don't like the chirping?"

"No it's not that, just that I can't figure out how to keep them from going off. There's gotta be a trick, right? I mean, these're ninja we're talking about. Janine?"

Janine smirked behind her mask. "If I told you, I'd have to kill you. Shinobi Code and all."

"Well one day, I'm gonna figure it out. There's gotta be a science behind it, something with how you apply pressure and weight to the wood. I bet it's at a certain angle, or maybe in the motion of the step."

Janine laughed. "Good luck. Science can only get you so far." She walked ahead and did a pirouette, landing in complete silence in the middle of the floor. "The rest is all in the technique."

Lily gaped. "How did... But I don't understand, I've definitely stepped there before and it chirped! I remember that spot because I always trip on this crack right here, see? How'd you do that?"

Ivy put a hand on her shoulder. "Actually, that reminds me. I've got a science question for you."

Lily brightened and smiled up at Ivy. "Oh, yeah? What's up?"

"Wigglytuff. Now that I think about it, Janine, you were there. It was when I told Wigglytuff to use Hyper Beam on some of your ninjas, but she did something totally different."

"Huh? Like what?"

"I dunno, really. She started glowing pink, almost white, and when she shot the Hyper Beam, it didn't look like anything I'd ever seen before."

"Oh, that," Janine said. "The Moonblast."

"Moon what?"

Lily gasped. "Wigglytuff used Moonblast? Wow, that's incredible! I didn't know Wigglytuff could use Fairy-type attacks already."

"Whoa, whoa, hold up. Fairy?"

"It's a rare Pokémon class," Janine explained. "I only know of it because my Poison-types have a type advantage over them. It was useful when a pack of stampeding Granbull from the wilds up north decided to run through Fuchsia a couple years back."

"Why's this the first time I'm hearing about it?"

Lily shrugged. "Well, not a lot of people know about it. It gets confused with Normal-type a lot in Kanto and Johto since a lot of the Fairy Pokémon are also Normal types, like Wigglytuff. Actually, Gary's really the person we should ask. He's the expert."

"Lily, you're a *genius*."

"Well, yeah, but in *dead* Pokémon. Wigglytuff's very much alive. C'mon, he's training with Scizor in the Gym."

Before Ivy could protest, Lily was dragging her by the hand to the arena. The floors chirped angrily underfoot at their passing. Gary was exactly where Lily had said he'd be, training in the rock garden with Scizor. And getting his ass kicked.

"Hit 'im again, Scizor!" Ash cheered from the safety of the sidelines with Pikachu and Gengar.

Gary spit blood and sand and wiped his already bruised jaw. The red mantis had barely broken a sweat as it waited for Gary to catch his breath. He was in rolled up jeans and a black wife beater soaked through with sweat and smeared with sand, but he adjusted his stance and gestured for Scizor to strike again.

"Hey, Gary!" Lily called. "We've got a question for you!"

Gary ignored her in favor of grappling with Scizor, who wasn't hitting to hurt or kill, but whose speed and stamina pushed Gary to limits even the best human partners couldn't go. Ivy learned that he'd been at this since Koga's death, day and night, hardly sleeping or eating.

"Gary," Ivy said. "It's important."

He continued to ignore the crowd and feinted left just long enough to fool Scizor and land a hit on its thorax with the heel of his palm. Ivy winced at the smacking sound it made against Scizor's steel hide. She was convinced not even Tyranitar's brute strength could hope to tear that Bug open.

A purple haze was the only warning anyone got just before Scizor lurched and tripped over thin air. It ate sand and missed its target completely, stunning Gary and the other onlookers. Ash burst out laughing, and Gengar echoed him as it materialized as a sinister cloud over Scizor. The red mantis glared up at the Ghost and beat its wings in warning, hissing and clicking its steely fangs. Gengar wiggled its claw-like hands at the sides of its head and stuck out its tongue, a black, tentacle-like appendage that leaked gaseous tar.

Lily stifled a giggle at Ivy's side and looked guiltily up at her. "Oh, c'mon, that was funny."

"Ash, what the hell?" Gary said as he shooed Gengar away and kneeled down next to Scizor.

Gengar recoiled from Gary, unwilling to get too close to him or the bright, white aura he emitted to its eyes, and scuttled back to Ash.

"Don't look at me," Ash said, still laughing.

"Is it always like this?" Janine said.

"It used to be," Ivy said as Gary and Scizor approached them.

He grabbed a water bottle from its place on top of a nearby geode and sprayed some on his face before sucking down half its contents in three gulps. Despite herself, Ivy watched the excess water trickle down his throat, trace the defined edge of his right pectoral muscle, and disappear under the low neck of his shirt. He never worked out without a shirt on when they were in Cerulean, all the more opportunity for her to rip it off him later. Her breath caught in her throat and she had to bite her tongue.

Damn...

He ran a hand through his damp hair and caught her ogling him. She bit down hard on her tongue by mistake and hastily looked away. Pain and embarrassment colored her cheeks and neck, and she tried to pass it off like she was just reaching for Wigglytuff's Great Ball all along.

"Dude, you reek," Ash said as he joined the group.

"*Dude*, you could stand to get in some training while we're here instead of goofing off with Gengar."

Ivy looked up just in time to catch Ash and Gengar pantomiming

Gary's stern face and reprimand. Lily laughed and covered her mouth.

"Stop, I'm gonna choke," she said through her giggles.

Wigglytuff materialized at Ivy's feet just then and sniffed the air. Scizor stared down at the bite-sized rabbit but made no move. Still, the way it looked at Wigglytuff made Ivy narrow her eyes. By now her flush was gone, and she picked Wigglytuff up.

"So, what's your question?" Gary asked Lily.

"Not me, Ivy."

All eyes turned to Ivy, and this time she didn't avert her gaze from Gary's. Swallowing the last of her earlier embarrassment she said, "Wigglytuff used a Fairy move earlier."

"Moonblast," Janine clarified.

"Right, that. Know anything about it?"

Gary frowned, and as though someone had flipped a switch in his programming, he suddenly fixated on Wigglytuff with intense interest. "Are you sure it wasn't a Hyper Beam?"

"Yeah, obviously."

He leaned close to Wigglytuff, and the pink rabbit leaned toward him with its curious nose. He let out a sharp breath and smirked that cocky smirk that made Ivy's insides dance a little.

"Huh, that was fast. Must be the Moonstone effect Bill told us about."

"Moonstone effect?" Lily asked.

Ash nodded. "Yeah, both Wigglytuff and Nidoking fast-track evolved when they touched this giant Moonstone back in Mt. Moon. Bill said Pokémon that evolve because of a stone like that tend to be a hell of a lot stronger than the ones that evolve normally."

Gary stood up straight and raised a hand to his chin, thinking. "That could be it. Since Wigglytuff's stronger than other Wigglytuff that evolved normally..."

"How about we get that in English?" Janine suggested.

Gary met Ivy's gaze again, his eyes alight with the fire of curiosity that

came when he talked about his grandfather's research and his own. "Fairies're rare. Gramps didn't know anything about them except that they existed until a few years back when some flamboyant professor in Kalos, Sycamore something or other, wrote a paper on them that got disseminated abroad. We don't have many in Kanto, and the ones we do have tend to hole up in hard-to-reach places, like Mt. Moon. Basically, though, a Pokémon like Wigglytuff, who's dual Normal and Fairy, should be able to use Fairy-type attacks when it's older and stronger."

"But since Wigglytuff Moonstone-evolved, she's stronger already," Ivy finished the thought.

Gary's smirk widened, and for a moment it was like they were back in Cerulean, conspiring together about the future after Team Rocket, about what they would do, where they would go, just the two of them. "Exactly."

"Well, that's cool and all," Ash said, "but what's Fairy good against?"

Gary's gaze shifted to Lily. "Supposedly, Dragons."

Ivy looked down at Wigglytuff, and Wigglytuff looked up at her with those dewy, purple eyes.

"*You look good in green, kid."*

The memory came to her out of nowhere, but she tensed and Wigglytuff felt it. It squirmed out of her arms and hopped onto the sand to scratch behind one of its long ears with its hind leg.

"Well, I guess if we meet any Dragons, we'll know who to send out. But I gotta say, I can't picture Wigglytuff going up against a Dragonite." Ash bit back a laugh. "Oh man, just picture it. A thirty-foot tall Dragonite shitting itself when it comes face to face with the Big, Bad Rabbit."

"It *is* a little hard to believe," Lily admitted. "Wigglytuff's so little."

"Luckily, the odds of you running into an enemy trainer who can actually command a Dragonite is about as likely as getting struck by lightning," Janine said. "I doubt you have anything to worry about."

"Lance trains Dragonite," Ivy said softly.

"What, the Champion? Sure, but he's an Elite Four. Professor Oak

already told us they're the good guys." Ash grabbed Lily's hands. "Hey, you know what? I bet when we meet Lance, he'll wanna talk to you, you know, since you're also a Titan."

"You think so? But he's the Champion! Oh my gosh, what if he hates me? What if he doesn't think I'm good enough to train Dragons?" Lily paled. "Oh god, I don't think I can go through with this."

"There's nothing to go through with," Gary said, an edge of exasperation in his tone. "Gramps wasn't even sure if he'd be able to convince the Elite Four to join us on Cinnabar."

"Cinnabar," Janine said. "That's where you're headed next?"

"Yeah. We're gonna ask Blaine for help against Team Rocket since the other Gym Leaders took a pretty hard blow back in Saffron and you've obviously got a lot on your plate here," Ivy said.

Gary pursed his lips and turned away from the group to set his water bottle back on the geode. Scizor followed and hunkered down into the sand to rest. Ivy noticed his retreat, but before she could say anything, Ash spoke up.

"Hey, I wanna see this new Fairy move in action." He squatted so that he was eye-level with Wigglytuff, and Pikachu squeaked excitedly by his side. "Whaddaya say?"

"I dunno, Ash, she's only done it once," Ivy said.

"Ash is right," Gary said, his back to the group. "You should make sure Wigglytuff can use Moonblast reliably before we get to Cinnabar. It could come in handy."

Ivy crossed her arms. She rubbed her hand where Lance had once shaken it, freezing and firm, like there was no warm blood in his veins at all. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"You guys're leaving in the morning, right?" Janine said. "It'll take you three or four days to get to Cinnabar flying, but you can rest at any of the Seafoam Islands. They're scattered for miles between Cinnabar and Fuchsia. The main island chain is in the middle of the Sea of Seasons, but there's a ton of little atolls and new, volcanic islands spread out around them. They're deserted, but they'd be a good place to spend some time training if you need it."

"You've been?" Gary said.

"Yeah, with Koga when I was little. Shinobi train under the harshest conditions. I guess a deserted island with no food and water in the middle of the open ocean's about as harsh as you can get."

He blinked and looked away again to recall Scizor to its Pokéball. Ivy frowned at his dodgy demeanor, but said nothing.

"I'm sorry I can't do more for you guys," Janine said. "But whatever supplies and food you need for your trip, consider them yours. It's the least I can do for all your help. Of course, in return, I expect you all to kick Team Rocket outta Kanto for good."

"You don't need to tell us twice," Ivy said.

"I wish I could join you guys. I wouldn't mind killing a few more Rockets. Too many of them got out of here as soon as word of the Siege of Saffron reached us. Cravens."

Janine was soon called away on Gym Leader business, and the foursome set to preparing for tomorrow's long journey. Ivy finished packing her things despite Wigglytuff's attempts to make a nest out of her clean clothes and burrow among them. When she grew hungry for dinner, though, Gary was nowhere to be found and Ash and Lily had already started. She grabbed a bowl from the Gym's kitchen and sat with them on the hardwood floors ringing the arena, bare feet in the sand.

"I was thinking more about that Fairy type," Lily said as they ate together. "Do you think there's a Tamer class that's got a Fairy affinity?"

"Well, yeah," Ash said. "They all do, right?"

"Ever heard of one?"

"Nah, but that doesn't mean they're not out there somewhere. Wonder what kinda Tamer fights with Fairies?"

"I dunno," Ivy said. "But if it's true that Fairies can stand up to Dragons, then I'd guess a Fairy Tamer would have to be something pretty incredible."

They sat in silence for a moment, dwelling on the thought, until Ash set his bowl down and laid back on the floor with his hands behind his head. Pikachu immediately took up residence on his chest and curled up.

"I guess. But Dragons're somethin' else. Glad we got one on our side."

Lily smiled to herself. "I'm glad, too."

Ivy chewed on her food and looked up at the starlit sky through the open roof. Torches burned in wall sconces about the arena, their orange flickers bringing the cracked geodes to life in dark purples and blues and rippling blacks. The air smelled faintly of salt from the sea not far from here, but spicy incense perfumed the air with hints of cinnamon and smoke. She could have dozed off here, under the stars like she had so many times with Karen in the mountains north of Blackthorn.

"Hey, Ash," she said at last.

"Hm?"

She set down her food, appetite sated, and leaned back on her hands. "You were with Gary when he fought Koga, right?"

"Sort of. I kinda showed up at the tail end of things. Just in time, too, or he woulda been a puddle on the street."

His hat was lowered over his eyes, so she couldn't see much of his expression. Firelight glowed against his profile, smoothing out his rough edges.

"Did something happen in the fight that you saw?"

"What do you mean?"

"Something," she trailed off. "I dunno, something that shook him. I keep getting the impression that something bad happened. Something that rattled him to the core."

"Well, he did fall like five hundred feet outta the sky to his death if Snorlax hadn't caught him. And he was fighting Koga, who was no slouch. But to be honest, I think my brain was still fried from the Muk poison. I just got in there and saved him. I didn't really notice a whole lot else. It was all kinda hectic."

"Yeah, I know. I was just wondering."

Lily said nothing as she listened to them.

"...Actually, now that I think about it." Ash pulled up his hat and turned to look at Ivy. "Janine did give him the Soul Badge. He didn't

show you?"

"No." Ivy raised a hand to her green cargo jacket, where the Marsh Badge was pinned securely to the inside right flap. "He didn't mention it at all."

Ash sighed. "Look, Ivy, I don't wanna pry or anything, so I've been stayin' outta this crap that's going on with you and Gary. But if you want my opinion, just give him some time. He's a stubborn ass, but he'll come around. He always does, you know that. I mean, c'mon. He's crazy about you."

Ivy rubbed a thumb over the Marsh Badge and gazed up at the night sky.

"*How're you not afraid of the dark?"*

"Sure," she said softly. "I hope you're right."

Lily got up and gathered their bowls. "I'll take these back to the kitchen."

"Thanks, Lily," Ash said.

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes, and disappeared down one of the corridors. The floors chirped along behind her.

After four days of flying from Saffron, Indigo Plateau finally came into view nestled at the base of Mt. Silver. Rosa squinted through her goggles and took in the sublime mountain scenery reminiscent of Aspertia City, where she'd lived until she was about five before relocating to Nuvema Town. Aspertia was a true mountain hamlet surrounded by crystal clear lakes and towering, purple peaks, but their height paled in comparison to the ominous Silver Mountains that bridged the Kanto-Johto border. Snow capped most of the tall peaks, and Mt. Silver itself, said to be home to fearsome Pokémon stronger than any others in the wild in this part of the world, loomed far above the cloud line.

Her Swanna honked as Oak and his Pidgeot suddenly banked right and began their descent. Rosa reluctantly pulled her gaze away from the humbling scenery and patted the large swan on her slender neck, ruffling downy, white feathers. Swanna dove after Pidgeot, and the city below came into view. Rustic cabins dotted the outer perimeters, swathed by pine trees and privacy, while closer to the city center,

more modern buildings and dwellings carved of stone, brick, and iron were clustered together. People traversed the streets by foot, bike, and Pokémon for their evening errands and outings. The air was crisp and chilly this high up, but Rosa took a deep breath and smiled a little. There was nothing like the taste of pure, mountain air.

The building Oak had zeroed in on was nothing short of a castle. It was old and weathered, but still standing even after the horrors of the Great War. As the Elite Four's stronghold, it was impregnable. The barbican alone stood some hundred feet high at the main gate of the castle, and thick walls branched out from either side to surround the entire perimeter. Turrets were spaced out along the perimeter wall, and Indigo Rangers patrolled the battlements between them with crossbows, sabers, and even catapults that sat dormant at the moment. Oak aimed for the barbican and steered Pidgeot to the outer bailey for a clean landing. Rosa followed his lead and landed Swanna a safe distance from the larger Pidgeot. She dismounted and ran her fingers through the large swan's blue underbelly feathers, which earned her a pleasant coo.

"You there!" someone shouted.

An Indigo Ranger in the royal purple and grey banner colors of Indigo Plateau jogged toward them. Rosa's gaze lingered on the crossbow strapped to his back and the quiver full of steel-tipped arrows at his hip.

"Ah, hello there," Oak greeted amiably. "I'm Professor Samuel Oak, here to see Lance. It's a matter of dire urgency."

The Ranger looked them both over. "Professor Oak," he said, the recognition clear in his tone. "It's an honor. You say you've come to speak with Master Lance?"

"That's right."

"Well, I'm sorry to tell you this, but you've just missed him."

"What? Where is he? What's happened?"

"Sorry, sir, I'm not authorized to know that information. All I know is that he left the others in charge while he's away. We Rangers're paid to keep the peace around the castle. The Elite Four worry about what goes on outside at Mt. Silver."

Oak nodded. "Yes, yes, it's all right, I understand. Still, this is an

emergency, and it can't wait. I'd like to speak with whoever's in charge here as soon as possible."

"Of course, sir. I'll relay your message to the Old Guard. I'm sure you won't have any trouble getting a meeting. In the meantime, I'll show you to your rooms."

"Rooms?" Rosa said. "I didn't think this was gonna be an extended stay."

"Sorry, ma'am, the Elite Four are very busy, even for someone like Professor Oak here. I'm afraid you'll just have to wait a bit."

She caught Oak's eye, and he nodded knowingly.

"That's just fine. Thank you for your hospitality."

Once they had recalled their birds, the Ranger led them through the inner bailey to the Indigo Keep, a huge, seven-story structure flanked by towers peppered with arrow slits. Cloth banners dyed purple and silver with the four-corner shield crest of the Elite Four emblazoned at the centers hung from each of the towers. Rosa let her eyes wander, marveling at the fantastical sight. There were few castles in Unova still standing, namely Dragonsong Castle in Opelucid City and the ruins of the once great Iron Keep in Vertress City in the heart of the northern mountains, and Rosa had never seen either of them. If they were half as grand as the Indigo Keep, they must be fit for gods and goddesses to dwell among men.

The Ranger led them through the Indigo Keep, down stone halls and up wide staircases, to a solar in the south wing. It was high-vaulted with blown-glass windows and decorated with leather and mahogany furniture. A fire blazed in the northern hearth, where a housemaid was tending to it with a poker. She bowed politely when the guests entered. Thick, viridian curtains were tied up with golden rope to let the sun in, but it was nearly set at this point. Doors led to connecting bedrooms and washrooms.

"This is the Olivine Solar," the Ranger explained. "Each of the four residential wings is named after a great city in Johto or Kanto. As you can see, the furnishings are also done in that city's traditional style."

"Lovely," Oak said. "When do you think we'll hear back about that meeting?"

"I'll put in the message now. With any luck, you'll be able to speak

with someone in the morning."

Oak sighed. "Very well. Thank you, um...?"

"Jonathan, sir. But around here, we all answer to 'Ranger'."

"Jonathan, thank you for your assistance. And please be sure to let the Old Guard know that my message is quite urgent."

Jonathan nodded. "I will. Please get some rest. Willa will see to your dinner."

The Ranger excused himself, and the housemaid who'd been fixing up the fire approached the duo with a smile. "That'll be me. And you two are?"

"Professor Samuel Oak," Oak introduced himself. "And this is my associate, Rosa."

"Very good, sir. I'll send up for your dinners. Do try to relax. You both look like you've had a long journey. You'll find everything you need in your rooms, and I'll be just a bell call away." Willa indicated the call bells connected to draw ropes that disappeared through narrow holes in the wall to the servants' quarters a floor below.

Oak and Rosa thanked the maid, and once they were alone again, he went to one of the windows and gazed outside to the courtyard below where a team of Rangers were training their Pokémon in formation.

"So, Lance is gone," Rosa said. "We didn't plan for that."

"No, and I can't imagine where he'd be. He rarely leaves Indigo Plateau. None of the Elite Four do."

"It'll take Gary and the others some time to finish their business in Fuchsia and travel to Cinnabar. Maybe we can spare a day or two, if it comes to that."

Oak ran a hand through his windblown hair. "I'd rather not. Team Rocket will be mobilizing as fast as they can. We can't afford to delay any longer than absolutely necessary."

Rosa set down her pack on the stone floor and leaned on the sill of the window next to Oak. "These Elite Four must be something incredible if you're coming all this way only to have to wait to see them."

"Ah, they are. Unova doesn't have any such overseers, does it?"

"Not with the way things've always been. The different fiefdoms have their Gyms, and that's good enough for them until someone gets greedy and decides to invade." She pursed her lips together and followed the Rangers' training movements without really looking. "But that didn't end so well for Castelia last time, apparently. I have no idea how four trainers can manage to keep Kanto and Johto in line the way these so-called Elite Four do. What can four people do against an entire nation? Two, in this case."

"And don't forget a hostile crime syndicate," Oak said with a grin. "Yes, I understand your skepticism, but the Elite Four are truly elites. And they have the Gyms backing them. That's how they really maintain their power. They can't be everywhere at once, after all."

"Sounds like a fragile system."

"It is, when you have people like Sabrina and Koga in the mix to thwart the balance. The system only works if the foundations stand sturdy and strong. But you mark my words. When the Elite Four intervene, no mere Gym Leader can stand against them. It's a double-edged sword, and it's been enough to keep two warring continents at relative peace for decades."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"*If* we see it. At this rate, with Lance out of town, I'm not sure how fruitful our visit here will be."

Rosa turned her back to the window and crossed her arms. Oak had a scowl on his face. The crags in his forehead ran deep, but even in his advanced age, she could see the striking resemblance he bore to his grandson. The old man had talked of Gary often on their journey from Hoenn to Kanto after Devon's representatives presented their findings on the Chimera Project.

"So, this woman Gary talked about. Agatha, right?"

"Yes, she's one of the Elite Four, but apparently she's gone missing. I don't know what's going on, but all the more reason to meet with one of them and find out what's been happening up here."

Rosa ran her fingers through one of her long pigtails. "Is she a Tamer?"

"Yes, of course. Agatha is a Medium. Why do you ask?"

"Then I can find out if she's here somewhere."

Oak's gaze unfocused as his mind raced. "Yes, that would be very helpful. Agatha would see me immediately if she knew I was here. I don't know why I didn't think of that before."

Rosa smirked. "Don't sweat it. It's not something you're used to doing."

She reached for a Pokéball and tossed it on the floor. A feline Pokémon with thick, creamy fur and tapering, leafy appendages stretched and raked its claws along the lavish, green and gold rug underfoot. Dark, almond-shaped eyes blinked up at Rosa, and the Pokémon trotted to her side.

"Leafeon," she said, kneeling down and scratching the lithe creature behind its long, leafy ear. "I need you to find the Medium."

Oak peered outside at the waning sunlight. "Will you have enough light?"

"Leafeon can manage. All he needs is a flicker of sunlight."

Leafeon swished its bladed tail through the air as it turned its snout toward the window and breathed in the last dregs of the day's sun. Rosa lay her hand gently on its neck and closed her eyes. The room came to life behind her dark lids in varying shades of green. Oak was the brightest point in the room by far with his Clairvoyant aura, shining bright white in her mind's eye. The stones cut and carved to build this room glowed a duller forest green, their natural energy long dormant compared to a living human's.

Leafeon's natural energy spread like a wide-cast jade net, first throughout the room, then throughout the Indigo Keep, then to the rest of the castle. Tendrils of natural energy flitted in every direction, connecting to the Rangers training in the courtyard and their Pokémon, to the white roses growing in the garden in the inner bailey, and to the thick pines beyond the castle's walls. But Rosa ignored them in favor of the one she was looking for, a bright thread distinct in color and feel. Mediums were a ghastly sort if the vibe she'd gotten from Ash back in Saffron was anything to go by. But she remembered the feel of him, the razor's edge between light and dark, hard to pin down but unique and unmistakeable. Rosa searched every inch of the castle for that liminal energy, until finally she ran head first into it.

With a gasp, she opened her eyes to find Oak kneeling down beside her. "Rosa, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"That took much longer than I thought it would. What happened?"

"I found the Medium, but I had some trouble. Something was blocking the energy. It didn't really feel like Ash's energy. It was like something was interfering with me. I can't really explain it."

"I don't like the sound of that. You did locate her, though?"

"Yeah. She's in a subterranean chamber in the northern part of the castle, exactly one point oh-three miles from here."

There was a knock at their door just then, but before either of them could admit the person, Willa barged in anyway with a broad tray of food.

"Your dinner," she said kindly. "Shall I call for wine?"

Oak rose and smiled. "No wine tonight, Willa, thank you."

"Very good. Please don't hesitate to ring me if you need anything else."

"I think we'll turn in early, actually. It's been a long few days."

"Of course, sir. Enjoy your dinner." Willa bowed politely and excused herself.

Rosa narrowed her eyes at the click in the door when Willa locked it behind her from the outside.

"Professor," she said quietly. "I don't think anyone wants us snooping around the castle."

"No, I don't think they do. Which is why we won't be going by foot."

He tossed out a Pokéball, and a tall, feminine Pokémon draped in a white gown materialized from the light. It shifted crimson eyes between Leafeon, Rosa, and Oak, the latter of whom it glided toward as if it had no feet at all and simply floated.

"A Gardevoir?" Rosa said. "I didn't know they existed in this part of the world."

"They don't. I picked her up as a Ralts back in Rustboro City. Shall we?"

He held out a hand for Rosa.

"I've never Teleported before."

Oak smiled, and the crows' feet around his eyes crinkled. "It's not the most pleasant experience your first time, but I assure you it's perfectly safe."

"All right. Let me get my pack."

Rosa and Oak gathered up their things and glanced briefly at the dinner Willa had brought. It smelled delicious, but there were more pressing matters to attend to. Rosa scooped up Leafeon in one arm and took Oak's hand in the other. Gardevoir held his other hand, and Rosa spared the elegant Pokémon a glance. It was nearly of a height with Oak, but its piercing, blood-red eyes were so off-putting that Rosa could hardly look at it for long.

"Okay!" Okay said. "Please don't let go of my hand. Gardevoir, let's go get Agatha."

Gardevoir, ever silent, closed its eyes and pulsated with Psychic energy. Rosa tried to hold her breath, but by the time she sucked in the air, the Olivine Solar flashed out of sight and took her stomach with it. There was hardly any time to gag when all of a sudden, a much darker, danker view materialized in front of her. The walls were stone just like the rest of the castle, but down here they were slick with moisture and cold with night. A pungent smell of mold and wet wool clogged the air, which did not do Rosa's stomach any favors.

"Oh my god!"

Oak's exclamation and the loss of his physical support sent Rosa to one knee. Leafeon leaped from her arms and trotted around her, alert for danger but skittish in the damp, dark, cold.

"It's okay," Rosa managed through her queasiness. "It's okay, Leafeon."

Oak and Gardevoir had approached the far wall, where a crystal coffin lay on a stone pedestal. Iron chains crisscrossed the lid of the coffin, entrapping the person who lay within it. Rosa struggled to stand and steadied herself on the wall to catch her breath.

That sucked.

"Agatha," Oak said.

Rosa rubbed her eyes. "Are you sure that's her?"

He stood at the head of the coffin and looked down at Agatha's face behind the crystal. "Positive. But I can't believe she'd be down here like some prisoner. Something's very wrong. I'm afraid Ivy may have been right."

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me," Rosa said under her breath.

Senses regained enough not to throw up all over the place, she hobbled toward the coffin and stood at the foot of it. Leafeon remained dutifully by her side.

"Wait a minute," Rosa said. "This coffin's made of ice. It's freezing."

When she tried to touch it, Oak snatched her by the wrist in a painful grip. "Don't! The chains, they're enchanted."

He released her, and Rosa examined the thick, iron chains that held the coffin together. They gave off a white mist, like smoke, but she wouldn't have noticed if Oak hadn't pointed it out.

"You can't see it because you're not Clairvoyant, but I can. They've been blessed with Psychic energy. A coffin carved from ice, and chains imbued with Psychic power..."

"What? What's the matter?"

Oak's expression was grim as he stared down at Agatha's atrophied form in the coffin. "Mediums live a long time. It's almost impossible to kill them by normal means. The only way to disarm them and render them useless is to drop their body temperatures to a degree where their Ghosts remain dormant, and to seal their Aura powers with strong Psychic energy. Someone wanted to keep Agatha and her Ghosts imprisoned for a very long time, and they knew exactly how to do it."

Rosa returned her gaze to the old woman sealed away in the ice coffin and bit her lip. "But who would do this to one of the Elite Four? And why? This is their stronghold."

Oak reached for another Pokéball at his belt. "That's what I'm afraid of." He released Slowking, and the crowned Pokémon waddled to the other side of the coffin. "I'd like to ask her myself once we get her out of there. Rosa, please stand back."

Rosa stepped away with Leafeon, who looked on curiously at the odd pair of Psychics Oak had assembled. Once she was clear of the coffin,

Oak let his hands hover over one of the enchanted iron chains that ran along the coffin. His eyes fell, and he mumbled something under his breath, but Rosa couldn't make it out.

"Slowking. Gardevoir. If you wouldn't mind," he said.

Slowking and Gardevoir mimicked Oak's positioning and, without prompting, began to channel Psychic energy. Oak gritted his teeth and began to shake, but he maintained his position as his Pokémon worked together to dispel the malicious energy. Rosa was no Clairvoyant, and she couldn't quite discern what was happening, but she could detect the surge in natural energy in the room. It was humongous, like nothing she'd ever felt before. The air popped and crackled, and breathing burned her throat. The chains began to glow as the natural energy imbued within them rose from dormancy and fought back against Oak and his Pokémon. Leafeon hissed at her side.

Oak's nose began to bleed from the strain, but the chains started to rattle as though with a life of their own. Gardevoir and Slowking pulsed with silvery light and maintained their output. Rosa had to look away from the bright clash of Oak's Psychic aura with that entrusted to the chains by whoever had locked Agatha away. In a flash so searing Rosa nearly cried out as the white light flooded her senses, the crackling energy suddenly dissipated like it had never been there at all. She sucked in a breath and blinked, trying to adjust to the gloom of the cell once more.

When she'd recovered, she found Oak slumped against the wall, panting and wiping his bloody face clean on his sleeve. "Professor!"

She was at his side in an instant and lending him a shoulder to lean on.

"I'm fine," he rasped. "Or at least, I will be with some rest. My goodness."

"What was that?"

"An extremely powerful Psychic trap. No doubt laid by an equally powerful Clairvoyant, though I can't imagine who. None of the Elite Four is Clairvoyant."

She helped him stand upright, and Gardevoir and Slowking stared at him expectantly. With a single look, he seemed to communicate whatever they needed to know, and they backed away from the coffin.

"Rosa, I don't suppose you happen to have a strong Ice-type Pokémon on hand that can break through that coffin?"

Rosa selected a Pokéball from her belt. "Actually, I do."

"Oh, really? That would actually be very helpful. My Nidoqueen isn't particularly fond of ice, or I'd have her break through the coffin."

Rosa tossed the Pokéball, and an eight-foot tall, snow-white bear rose up on its hind legs from within the white flash. "Professor Juniper gave Beartic to me as a Cubchoo when she took me in. I think he'll do just fine."

Oak's expression brightened. "Incredible! I've never seen a Beartic up close. I hear they're quite hostile in the wild."

Beartic hunkered down on all fours and sniffed the air. It growled low in the pit of its belly as it focused beady, black eyes first on Leafeon, then on Rosa. Its breath came in misty puffs, icy enough to drop the temperature of the room enough to notice. Slowly, it lumbered toward her and nudged her in the chest with its wide muzzle. She patted it gently.

"In the wild, yeah. But not if you raise them up from Cubchoo."

"Well, I couldn't ask for better luck. Now, if you would be so kind, let's get Agatha out of there."

Rosa situated Oak against the wall so that he wouldn't slump to the floor and walked to the side of the coffin. She scanned the trap, dark eyes narrowed.

"Leaf Blade."

Leafeon jumped into the air and swung its verdant tail with all the force of the sharpest of swords and sliced clean through the iron chains shackling the coffin in place. They clattered to the stone floor in loud clinks and clanks, leaving only the ice coffin between Rosa and the slumbering Agatha. Signaling to Beartic, Rosa pointed to the coffin.

"Smash it. Carefully."

Beartic rose up on its hind legs again and sank its front claws into the ice coffin. With a snarl, it dug its nails in through the ice, unfazed by the sheer cold on contact, and yanked with all its might. The coffin

whined, but the lid came apart between Beartic's claws in pieces. They fell to the floor and spilled frostlings in between the stone bricks. Rosa shivered at the plummeting temperatures just having Beartic in the room and recalled Leafeon to spare it the debilitating cold.

"Excellent," Oak said as he rushed to the head of the coffin.

Rosa patted Beartic on its neck above the icy mane it created from its sub-zero breath. "Good boy."

The big bear made a grunting sound as it nudged her in the chest again. She recalled it and took a deep breath, already noticing the room's temperature re-calibrating.

"Agatha," Oak said as he laid a hand on the old woman's forehead.

His Psychic Pokémon gathered around her and laid their hands on her. Once again, they pulsed with silvery light that inundated her still form. Rosa shielded her eyes and took a step back as they worked their magic on Agatha.

"Agatha!"

Before Rosa's eyes, a miracle unfolded. Agatha took a rattling breath and opened her dark eyes, where the first sight she saw was Oak's face.

"S-Sam?" Her voice cracked like an old, dusty book opened for the first time in years.

Oak broke out into a stupid grin and held her face in his hands. "Yes, it's me. You're all right now, you're safe. I'm here."

"I'm s-so cold."

Without prompting, Gardevoir and Slowking worked together to levitate Agatha out of the ice coffin and into Oak's arms for support. She was so frail, starved of life and light, and she shivered in his hold.

"We have to get you warm."

"S-Sam? It's really you?"

"Yes, of course. I came to find you. What happened? Can you remember?"

Rosa slipped off her pack and unclipped the survival blanket from its

storage place. She unfolded it and held it out for Agatha.

"Here, this should help a little."

Agatha accepted the blanket and Oak wrapped it around her shoulders. She huddled into it, trembling like a leaf. "Thank you."

Oak spun Agatha around and searched her face. "Aggie," he said softly. "Come on, I need you to remember. This is very important. Do you know why you were imprisoned down here?"

Agatha's breath came in rattling puffs. She raised one of her bony fists in front of her face and flexed it. Violet light flashed within her dark eyes in anger.

"Damnit, it's too cold. I can't rouse my Ghosts."

"Never mind that right now."

As though she'd just noticed Oak and Rosa, Agatha tensed up. "Sam, you can't be here. They'll find us."

"Who? Who put you down here? What happened?"

"Forget that. We need to get out of here, *now*." She shook her head and stared into the gloom, seeing shadowy swords that weren't there at all. "That damned Delphi will know the chains broke, and he'll bring his bitch with him."

Agatha gripped Oak's wrist hard enough to hurt, if his reaction was anything to go by. She fixed her chilling stare on Rosa next.

"You, Sylvan. You know the way out, yes?"

"I can find it."

"Good. Sam, get us out of here, and I mean *now*."

Rosa released Leafeon again and laid a hand on the back of its neck. "The courtyard is exactly point thirty-four miles directly above us."

Oak nodded stiffly, and Rosa laid a hand on Agatha's shoulder while Leafeon jumped into her arms. Gardevoir and Slowking quickly teleported them to the courtyard above ground, where night had set in and the mountain stars twinkled overhead by the thousands.

"Agatha, you need to tell me what happened," Oak said as she and

Rosa regained their bearings after the Teleport. "What's happened to the Elite Four?"

"It's under new management."

The unfamiliar voice drew everyone's attention to two figures, who'd suddenly appeared in the courtyard opposite them. Rosa took a step back.

They weren't here a moment ago when I sensed the area. So how...?

A man and a woman dressed in identical grey and indigo armor approached slowly, and the starlight illuminated their features. The man was young, not much older than Rosa, with matching chestnut hair and eyes and a straight-edged nose. Freckles covered his face like a pen had exploded in his face and he'd never bothered to wash away the ink. The look in his eyes, though, was one of measured cruelty, the look of a man hardened to the wails and weeping of children in pain. The woman, slightly older, had silver hair that hung loose down to her waist, like the moon itself had kissed her so she could shine in its place on this dark night. But her eyes were black as the night sky, and they drained the light in the vicinity like two bottomless pits. Her painted lips curled in a smirk that twisted her handsome face. Haunting, if there was a word for her.

"Who are you?" Oak demanded.

"We're the Elite Four," the woman said. "Well, half of it."

Agatha hissed and pushed Oak behind her. "Stay away, monster!"

The man burst out laughing. "Oh look, Karen. The shriveled old cunt's still got some juice in her. We'll have to tell Lorelei to make her coffins colder from now on."

"I don't understand," Oak said. "You're not the Elite Four. I know all of them personally."

"Like I said," Karen said. "New management."

"Sam, these are the ones who confined me," Agatha hissed. "That one, Will, he's Clairvoyant and a damn good one if I ever saw it. The woman is a Reaper in the blackest sense. They were Team Rocket, but now they've been promoted to the Elite Four to take over for Bruno and myself."

"What's happened to Bruno?"

"He was *boring*," Will interrupted with a lazy wave of his hand. "So Lance killed him, just like that. And with Agatha getting so old and senile, there were suddenly two openings that needed filling. Not much of an Elite Four with only two members."

"No, impossible," Oak said. "Lance would never—"

"Never what?" Karen said. "Never kill a Bellator? Professor, with all due respect, you're a little smarter than that. Titans only care about power. *All* Titans. Anyone who stands in their way is an obstacle to be cut down and fed to the dogs."

"No, you lie. Lance is different. Agatha, you said so yourself."

Agatha hung her head. "No, Sam. I was wrong. I didn't see it until it was too late, and when I left for Lavender, that was my death sentence. He was waiting for the right time to murder Bruno, while I wasn't here to stand in his way. I was such a fool."

"Yes, you were," Will said. "Imago tend to be so wedded to their inane ideals, though. I can hardly expect an old bitch to learn any new tricks at your age, Agatha."

"Insolent trash," Agatha spat. "You're nothing but a craven, attacking me unawares and imprisoning me instead of fighting me face to face. You know my Ghosts would have gladly torn your soul to shreds."

Karen stepped forward and reached for a Pokéball. "Bold words, Imago. Don't you have any for me, too? My pets haven't tasted Imago flesh before."

Agatha shuddered and stayed her ground. Rosa watched this all unfold in silence, reeling.

"*The system only works if the foundations stand sturdy and strong."*

She watched those very foundations crumble before her eyes with each of Agatha's terrified trembles.

"Rosa," Oak said softly. "I need you to get Agatha out of here. Get to Cinnabar and relay what's happened here to my grandson and Blaine. Can you do that?"

Rosa was too shocked to respond.

"No one's going anywhere," Karen said. Her voice dropped in pitch and cut like knives on a whetstone.

Oak handed Rosa a Pokéball before she could protest. "Go!"

Rosa fumbled with the Pokéball just as Karen and Will released their Pokémon. Oak waved his arm, and Gardevoir and Slowking fired off twin Psychics that hurtled straight for Will and Karen. An unseen force pushed Rosa and Agatha backwards, away from Oak as he faced off against two members of the new Elite Four.

Karen and Will sent out Honchkrow and Xatu to fight for them, and the two Flyers took to the skies for an aerial sweep.

"Shit," Rosa swore, reaching for a Pokéball.

"Get out of here!" Oak barked as his Pokémon's Psychic attacks hammered into the enemy Pokémon.

"Night Slash," Karen said.

Honchkrow squawked and swooped down low for a super-effective attack against Slowking. But Gardevoir, under telepathic command, glowed with a soft, pink aura and launched a Moonblast beam that zigzagged toward Honchkrow. Xatu's interference with a timely Light Screen shielded Honchkrow from the attack at the last moment.

"Go now!" Oak shouted.

Rosa finally regained her motor skills and released both Swanna and Oak's Pidgeot in a swirl of light. She then helped Agatha climb into Pidgeot's saddle and strapped her in. The old woman made an attempt to resist, but her enfeeblement made it a futile pursuit and she batted her veiny, skin and bone hands fruitlessly against Rosa's thick armor.

"Sam! Don't be stupid!"

Slowking spit out a thick jet of water that slammed into Xatu and sent it flying, but Will released yet another Xatu that took to the sky on painted, white wings.

"Future Sight!" he shouted.

"Agatha, we have to go, it's what he wants!" Rosa said as she strapped the old woman into the saddle.

"I won't leave him!"

Honchkrow fired off another Night Slash that slammed into Slowking before Gardevoir could intervene, knocking it down and tearing open its belly. Entrails and offal spilled in a bloody ooze on the grass, and Slowking groaned in pain. Oak threw another Pokéball, and Venusaur emerged with a Vine Whip that sought to smack the birds out of the sky.

"We have to," Rosa said through gritted teeth. "Or we'll all die here."

She'd finished strapping Agatha in and mounted Swanna, who was honking furiously at the commotion.

Oak raised a hand, and Gardevoir powered up a massive Psychic attack that would wash over both Will and Karen and fifty yards of castle grounds.

"Sam, don't do this!" Agatha screamed.

He looked back at her, eyes full of emotion, and did his best to smile through the tears that misted his tired eyes. "Help them, Aggie. I know you can."

With a silent, telepathic command, Pidgeot shot into the air over Agatha's protests and her fight to rein it in. Rosa's breath hitched in her throat as she cast Oak a final look and bade Swanna Fly.

Honchkrow absorbed the massive Psychic attack with a rebellious squawk, and Xatu was quick to Wing Attack Venusaur's vines into lifeless, bleeding tangles that fell to the ground, unmoving. Karen threw another Pokéball, and a snarling Houndoom with a broken left horn emerged. It fired off a devastating Flamethrower that caught fire to Venusaur's flower, making the hulking Pokémon roar in pain.

"Sam!" Agatha cried out.

"Dark Pulse," Karen commanded remorselessly.

A sinister wave of dark energy rippled forth from both Honchkrow and Houndoom and slammed into Gardevoir and Venusaur, merciless. Gardevoir screamed and writhed in pain. Oak tried to reach for another Pokéball, but out of nowhere, a silvery light materialized in the darkness and slammed into him from behind. The Future Sight attack washed over him completely, bathing the courtyard in brilliant, silvery light. Swanna rose higher in the air next to Pidgeot, clear of the blast zone, and the scene blurred.

"No!" Agatha wailed.

She was slumped over Pidgeot's crest, trembling even as the bird shot forward into the night, southbound and gaining speed. Rosa tore her tearful eyes from the carnage and directed Swanna to follow Pidgeot before Will and Karen could come after them directly. She dared not look back, but the vision just ahead of a frail, defeated Agatha was reason enough.

Unable to summon her Ghosts from their slumber deep within her, unable to fight, unable even to reach him now with her voice, Rosa watched as the oldest, most respected member of the Elite Four shriveled up and cried, perhaps for the first time in all her too-long life, for something she'd lost long ago.

20. Seafoam Islands

Triumvirate, chapter 20: Seafoam Islands
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Lily stretched out in her armor, which had finally dried out and lost its sewage odor after days out in the sun and sea breeze. The red ringlets that protected her joints over the woven, metal, mesh under armor stretched like exposed, bloody muscles with her movements. Pikachu hopped behind her, trying to catch her long ponytail as it fluttered in the sea breeze. Underfoot, the pink sands of Fuchsia's coast shone in the predawn light like a billion crushed gemstones.

"Ready, ChuChu?" she said to the squat but energetic rodent at her feet.

Pikachu leaped into her arms and climbed up on her shoulder, squeaking excitedly. Nearby, Gary had released Aerodactyl and was adjusting the saddle straps to accommodate Lily. The winged reptile had fully recovered from its aerial battle with Koga, though several of its shale scales were chipped and charred where Crobat's venom had burned the hell out of them. Still, Aerodactyl was back to its usual self and turned its nose to the air, scenting for prey that might wander onto land. Lily smiled and jogged to it.

"Hey there, Rocky, you look like you're ready to get in the air, huh?" she said as she patted the beast's snout.

Aerodactyl let its mouth hang open a little, exposing wicked, filed teeth, but it leaned into her touch. Gary eyed their contact with a guarded expression.

"Aerodactyl's one of those Dragon descendants, isn't it," he said.

"Hm? Oh, I dunno. I guess he does look pretty Dragon-like, now that you mention it."

Gary said nothing to that as he finished adjusting the saddle. Aerodactyl made a low rumbling sound of contentment when Lily scratched it behind one of its horns, and she grinned.

A high-pitched whistling drew their gazes to where Ash was trying to get Charizard's attention. The orange pseudo-Dragon had been flying over the shallows in the bay on the hunt, and its searching had paid off as it dragged a hefty Seaking in its claws back to shore. The fish

was still twitching, but Charizard dropped it flailing on the beach and belched out a superheated puff of fire that flash cooked it instantly. Scales peeled and popped, and Seaking's eyes evaporated in their sockets. Aerodactyl squawked and crept toward Charizard and its prize, jaws open and slick with drool. Noticing the threat, Charizard growled in warning and leaked black smoke from its nostrils. The two Flyers faced off over the meat.

"Aw, c'mon," Ash said. "You gotta do this *now*?"

Charizard ripped into the half cooked Seaking and tore off a hunk of meat and fin, which it swallowed in a single gulp. Aerodactyl went for the head, but Charizard spread its wings and roared again. Bigger and naturally resistant to Charizard's fire, Aerodactyl squawked and tore into the other half of the Seaking. Charizard sank down on all fours and lashed its tail, its anger building, until Ash intervened.

"Okay, okay, that's enough. Just finish your food and sit down so I can finish getting this saddle on you. Geez."

Charizard glared down at Ash in defiance, but Ash glared right back. Gengar emerged from his shoulders as a sentient, dark cloud with leering eyes. Charizard's lips curled in a snarl, but it dared not lash out at the Ghost. Ash patted the big lizard on its neck, and Charizard continued to simmer. Aerodactyl was still chewing on Seaking's head and part of its torso, so Charizard ripped at the tender flesh of its underbelly, searing it with every bite so the meat cooked.

"I guess they didn't have breakfast?" Lily said.

Charizard eyed her as she approached Ash and kept its head down, gaze alert.

"Yeah, right. I let Charizard out when I woke up to go find food. This is like, breakfast number four or something."

"Boys and their Dragons," Ivy said dismissively. "I'll take Batty over them any day."

She had finished saddling Crobat up, and the big bat was busy cleaning its wings. It stepped gingerly in the sand, unaccustomed to the springy substance underfoot.

"What about Tyranitar? He's probably more of a monster than any of our other Pokémon," Ash said.

"Tyranitar's not the one holding us up eating for five stomachs."

"Ooh, you hear that, Charizard?" Ash said. "Ivy just called you fat."

Charizard ignored him and continued to feast on what remained of Seaking, what little Aerodactyl hadn't already eaten.

"Lily, come over here so I can give you a leg up," Gary said.

"Okay!"

She jogged back to Gary and Aerodactyl, and he gave her a foot to stand on with his clasped hands. Aerodactyl was a tall Pokémon even hunched over, but once she was in the saddle, Lily strapped herself in and gave Pikachu a scratch on the nose.

Soon, everyone was mounted up and ready to go. Nothing remained of Seaking's carcass but a few uneaten bits of fin and scales.

"Take it slow out there," Janine said as she patted Ivy's Crobat with her poisoned fingers. The bat allowed the contact and twitched its ears, perhaps recognizing Janine's heritage. "Seafoam's kind of a disaster zone for storms and whirlpools. Better to hole up if you run into trouble and wait it out, trust me."

"We will, thanks, Janine," Ivy said. She held out her hand, and the new Fuchsia Gym Leader shook it with her healing hand. "I'm glad we were able to help out a little."

"I had a feeling you would when I met you. Like I said, you and me, we work well together. If you ever need anything...well, you know where to find me."

Lily gazed out over the Fuchsia harbor toward the west, beyond which lay the Seafoam Islands and Cinnabar. It seemed a world away after everything that had happened over the past several weeks. Gary settled into his seat in front of her, his Saffron-issued armor like a second skin that followed every move and ripple in his muscles.

"So, we ready?" Ash called from Charizard's back. His Pikachu squeaked, and Lily's Pikachu chittered back.

"Ready," Ivy said as Janine backed up to give them some space to take off.

"Take care of Fuchsia!" Lily said to Janine, waving.

"I will. You guys be safe out there."

"Let's go," Gary said, nudging Aerodactyl.

The ancient reptile pushed off the sand and spread its massive, leathery wings. Janine had to shield her face to keep the sand from her eyes and nose. Lily held on tight as they warred against gravity and won, lifting off higher and higher into the sky. Ivy and Ash followed close behind on their mounts, and soon Janine was nothing more than a speck on the ground hundreds of feet below. Lily lowered her goggles and took a deep breath of salty, morning air and wrapped an arm around Pikachu as it settled at her lap.

Within minutes, they had left the Fuchsia coast far behind and soared over open water. She looked down, eyes wide with wonder. A school of Magikarp swam just under the surface, tightly packed as they made themselves appear like one giant fish to ward off predators. The sun had breached the horizon and cast a shimmering glow over the seascape from behind, and for as far as she could see, the ocean's surface glittered like a living mirror. Farther out to sea, a school of Tentacruel and Tentacool floated with the currents. Their red, bulbous eyes reflected the sunlight with all the radiance of rubies sewn into dark velvet. The sight of them took her breath away, but not for their beauty as she recalled the last time she'd seen their kind from the balcony of the S.S. Aqua devouring the corpse of the Rocket Agent she'd murdered with Pikachu's help.

She sat back up in the saddle and stared at Gary's back, slightly hunched as he leaned forward over Aerodactyl's neck. Ash and Ivy flanked them at distances too great to have any kind of conversation over the whipping winds unless she shouted. She bit her lip and cast a glance at Pikachu, who'd begun to snooze in her lap, lulled by Aerodactyl's smooth flying.

"You know, Gary?" she said just loud enough for him to hear. "I'm really happy you guys let me tag along with you."

He cast her a brief glance over his shoulder. "You've been a big help so far. We need that."

She smiled a little. "Yeah, that's good. I guess it's nice to be needed. I've never really been on an adventure or anything like what you guys've been doing. When I met Ivy, the biggest adventure I ever had was getting on a boat and going from one lab to another, doing the same thing I always do."

He said nothing, but his shoulders tensed at the mention of Ivy's name. Lily took a steadying breath and kept going.

"I didn't really find out about her past with Team Rocket or her mission until, well, I kinda had no choice."

"She told us the story."

"A story," Lily mused. "It's funny to say it like that, like it happened to someone else, or it was all a dream. Sometimes I still dream about it. He had a knife, that Rocket Agent, and I dunno how or why, but I just knew he was gonna kill her when I followed him. It was something in his step, like they were the last steps he was ever gonna take." She forced a laugh. "Sounds weird, right?"

She didn't give Gary a chance to answer.

"But I followed him anyway, and I saw Ivy trying to get that woman's body over the balcony. It looked heavy, and Ivy's not really all that big, you know? I remember wondering, how's she lifting that body all by herself? I think the man wondered that, too. He stopped to watch for a minute, and I just stood there. You know how they say that stuff all happens too fast, and there's nothing you coulda done? That's not really how it is. You know exactly what you're gonna do. Just like I knew I wanted ChuChu to use Thunderbolt before he even had a chance to raise that knife."

This time, she paused and waited. Gary barely moved in front of her, like he hadn't heard her at all. But softly, almost too soft to hear over the winds, he said, "That was your first time."

The sun was high in the sky by now as they'd been flying for hours. In every direction, the endless blue of the sea and sky stretched forever, and them the only remnants of land and life seemingly forever. It closed in on them from all sides, oppressive in its endlessness.

"But not my last," she said. "Not as long as Team Rocket and anybody else out there tries to hurt the people I love. That's what Ivy taught me. It's what kept me alive back in Saffron, too. I envy her, you know. She's been through so much, and I'll probably never really get it. But she keeps fighting. When I met her, she was by herself and she still wasn't afraid to try. I wish I could be like that."

"Murder isn't something you should romanticize," Gary said curtly. "And believe me, you don't want to be like that. You don't even know what you're saying."

She watched his back, suddenly tired as she turned over his words. "Is that what you told yourself when you murdered Janine's father right in front of her?"

He stiffened, and Aerodactyl caught an air current and rose sharply with a squawk. Pikachu squeaked and sank its tiny nails into Lily's armor harmlessly as it was jolted awake. Lily kept her gaze firmly on Gary's back, jaw clenched and amber eyes ever watchful.

"What the hell're you talking about?" Gary demanded. "You weren't even there."

"I didn't have to be. I saw it all after. You could barely talk to Janine. And you still can't look Ivy in the eye like you mean it. Ash didn't see it, and Ivy can't really do anything about it. But I can."

There was a long pause as Gary leveled off Aerodactyl again. He kept his eyes on the western horizon, which was dotted with gathering clouds. "What do you think you can do? You don't even know me."

"I can listen." She laid a hand flat on Gary's back, and he tensed. "I can lighten your load a little, just like Ivy did for me. Whatever you don't wanna say, say it to me."

She let her hand fall and wrapped it around Pikachu, who nuzzled her palm affectionately. Gary said nothing, and she didn't push him. The wind was cool and refreshing on her cheeks, and Lily had always loved the sea. She snacked on one of the energy bars Janine had packed for them and passed Gary one, though he refused it wordlessly. Lying back flat against Aerodactyl's lower back, she watched its tail swish elegantly behind and the gathering clouds pass her by overhead. Hours passed, and the blue skies were hardly visible at all behind the clouds, which had turned grey with unshed rain. Below, small crescent-shaped atolls and deserted volcanic islands peppered the seascape, few at first but more frequently clustered as the group soared west. She was half dozing when Gary's voice reached her.

"I didn't know Koga was Janine's father," he said. "Not until it was done."

Lily sat up and disturbed Pikachu, who'd been curled up on her stomach. Her heart leaped into her throat, but she swallowed hard and steadied her voice. "You couldna known."

"But I could've given him a better death than—"

He cut himself off, shaking a little. Lily waited for him to collect himself.

"Psychics tear their enemies apart, flesh and bone, it doesn't make a difference. They don't fight to hurt. They fight to kill. He knew that, I could see it in his eyes. He was *afraid* of me." Gary paused, and Lily resisted the urge to lay a hand on his back. "I was the last thing he ever saw."

"He was Team Rocket. He was bleeding Fuchsia dry. You saw that, too."

Gary whipped around and glared daggers at her. "He was her father!"

Lily did her best to remain calm and still. Gary's green eyes were narrowed in fear and shame and anger as he looked her over, accusatory, like this was all her fault. But the moment passed, and he averted his gaze forward again.

"He was her father," he said again. "And I killed him like an animal. Not even Team Rocket deserves to die like that."

"Is that really what's bothering you? That you killed the bad guy and stopped him from getting back to Team Rocket where he coulda done who knows what else to Fuchsia?"

"Of course not. Team Rocket's gotta be stopped, we all know that."

"Then you wish you coulda killed him in a nicer way? I don't have to be a genius to think that smells like you're romanticizing what still comes down to cold-blooded murder."

He rubbed his eyes. "No, that's not what I meant."

"Then is it just that Koga was Janine's father? What about all the other people you've killed? They all had fathers and mothers, siblings, maybe even children of their own. Why're their deaths so forgettable?"

"They're *not*," Gary protested. He ran his hands through his hair and dug his fingers into his scalp. "Damnit."

Lily let him have his moment. He was so tense and wound up that she was sure he'd burst at any second. Her throat tightened and she glanced to her left, where Ivy and Crobat were floating along the air currents too far away to overhear their conversation. Her gaze fell and she clenched her fists.

"I called her a monster," Gary said finally. He spoke as though it pained him to form the words, so tired and beaten. "I promised her I wouldn't, and then I turned around did the opposite. When I saw what she did to Sabrina, I just... She was like me, Clairvoyant, and Ivy just...with her bare hands, she..."

Lily remained silent as he warred within himself.

"But Sabrina, she was a monster, too. And Alakazam just ripped into Koga like it was nothing, on *my* command. I can't stop seeing his eyes, the way he looked at me like...like...

"...Like the way you look at Ivy?" Lily finished.

He cast her a wary glance over his shoulder.

"I told you, I've seen you. I know what people think of me, you know. And I know they don't pay me much mind. You see a lot when people don't think you're looking."

Gary could only stare, eyes wide and turbulent with emotions he couldn't even begin to vocalize, they'd been pent up for so long, twisted and deformed.

"Since I met Ivy, I've had to kill people with my own two hands. I've been kidnapped, beaten, lied to, coerced, and I shoulda died a long time ago." She held his gaze, and for the life of him, he could not look away. "But I also stayed alive because of her. Because of Steven. Because of Ash. And because of me, too."

The clouds overhead had darkened to the point of near blackness, and thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. The wind whipping her face was clogged with moisture and salt, and she could almost taste the threat of lightning that sparked deep in the hearts of the thunderheads above.

"We're all monsters," she said. "Koga and Sabrina, Ash and me, Steven, Ivy...and you, too. We're all different, but we're all the same. The sooner you can accept that, the faster you can learn how to control it." Her gaze shifted to Ivy again, and Gary followed her line of sight. "That's why I envy her. She's not afraid of the truth. You shouldn't be, either."

Lightning cracked, and the stench of ozone hit Lily's nostrils like a slap in the face. The air was almost too hard to breath as it burned the back of her throat.

"Hey, Gary!" Ash called as he angled Charizard in closer to Aerodactyl. "I can't fly Charizard in the rain! We gotta find shelter!"

It was already too dark to make out much in terms of the islets' surface topography, but Ivy swooped down closer to the water's surface. Gary and Ash were quick to follow her lead.

"There!" she shouted over her shoulder. "I see some caves on that atoll!"

Lily followed the direction of her pointing to a crescent-shaped atoll overrun with small rivers that bisected it several times over. In between them, winding volcanic stone rose up like tangled snakes over the sand and around the few trees and greenery that grew there, swaying more and more violently in the whipping winds as the storm descended.

"Let's go!" Gary shouted to be heard over the winds.

The rains started then, a heavy dump that seemed to pound the three Flyers with force and desire enough to send them sinking into the sea's frothing waves. Charizard roared, but Ash kept it under control long enough to steer it toward the atoll Ivy had indicated. As soon as he landed, Ash hurriedly dismounted and recalled Charizard before it went on an angry rampage. Aerodactyl was calmer, less irritated by the rains, and Lily slipped out of the saddle and patted its hide.

"Good boy, Rocky," she said, smiling.

Gary recalled the ancient beast just as Ivy recalled Crobat. The rains were merciless, and another bolt of lightning cracked overhead. Lily's ponytail, soaked and heavy, smacked her in the face as the winds slammed into her from all sides. She hugged Pikachu to her chest with one arm and shielded her face with the other.

"C'mon! We have to get inside!" Ivy said, doing her best to run against the winds toward the mouth of one of the caves she'd found.

The foursome made their way as quickly as they could toward shelter, though Lily lost her footing in the winds and tripped. Pikachu rolled out of her arms and struggled to stay grounded.

"ChuChu!"

Ash was there in a flash, skidding in the sand and catching her Pikachu under his free arm before it could blow away. With a Pikachu

secured under each arm, he struggled to stand with Lily's help against the winds.

"C'mon!" she said, and they jogged together after Gary and Ivy into the cave.

Waterlogged and windblown, Ash and Lily stumbled into the cave and nearly fell over again at the sudden change in air pressure. The winds howled like wailing banshees outside the mouth of the low cave, but they didn't penetrate more than a few feet inside. There were cracks in the cave walls and ceiling where water leaked through, but it followed weathered trenches and gravity toward deep grooves in the floor, where it gathered in clear pools.

"Thanks," Lily said.

Ash handed Pikachu back to her while his jumped down onto the ground. "Don't sweat it," he said with a lopsided grin.

Somehow, his damned hat had remained on his head even in the midst of the storm. Lily reached up and pulled the bill down playfully.

"Are you sure this thing's not glued to your head?"

"Ash's head's so big that that thing's never coming off," Ivy quipped from her place against the wall, where she was rummaging around her pack for supplies.

"Hey, it comes off just fine." Ash pulled off his hat to prove the point and stuck it on Lily's head before she could evade.

"Ew, it's all soggy," she complained as she pulled her ponytail through the loop in back. A small waterfall dripped onto the cave floor as she wrung out her hair.

"So're you," he teased, pulling the bill down over her forehead like she'd done to him earlier.

"If you guys're done," Gary said, "how about emptying out the packs to dry before all our food gets too soggy to eat."

Everyone huddled around and emptied their packs. All their blankets and sleeping bags were soaked and would be of no use tonight, not that anyone would be getting much sleep on the uneven lava rock floor and with the storm howling outside. Thunder echoed in the cave whenever it cracked like a Voltorb had Self-Destructed.

Gary released Arcanine, who pawed the ground restlessly as it bumped its head against the low ceiling, whimpering. But Gary calmed the big canine and got it to lie down on the floor so he could share its natural heat. Ivy released Houndoom, who ended up plopping down next to Gary and Arcanine before she could do anything about it.

"Houndoom, c'mon, let's go over here," she said, indicating the opposite wall.

But the black hellhound yawned and sprawled out with its head on Arcanine's paw. At half Arcanine's size, Houndoom had no problem acting like they were still tiny Growlithe and Houndour chasing each others' tails and anything else that moved. Gary watched the exchange as he chewed on some jerky.

"It's fine," he said. "We'll never separate them in this storm."

Ivy hesitated, but before she could say anything, Gary scooted over and made room for her.

"Just get over here already."

With no other choice lest she make it awkward, Ivy sat down next to Gary and leaned back against Arcanine's heated belly. Houndoom inched closer and pressed its back up against her thigh, warming her through her armor like a living furnace.

"Thanks," she mumbled, curling in on herself.

Ash was busy staring out the mouth of the cave. "Yup, this should be a good fit."

"Hm?" Lily said as she separated out their food to eat.

Ash tossed out a Pokéball, and Snorlax coalesced within the light. The big bear was fast asleep on its back, and its hulking form filled most of the cave, blocking the entrance. Immediately, the sharp, snapping winds dulled to distant whistling and the air grew calmer.

"Ash," Gary said in warning.

"Oh, can it. Snorlax saved your life, remember? You don't get to say shit about him anymore."

Ivy bit back a laugh, and Gary shot her a dirty look.

"Wow," Lily said. "He's so big!" She reached out and ran her hands through the bear's fur. "And soft, too. But Snorlax're pretty dangerous... You're sure it's okay to fall asleep around him?"

"Don't worry, at this rate, Snorlax'll be asleep for the next few days if I let him. I hope we find an island with a ton of food just lying around for when he wakes up. He can be a little grumpy when he's hungry."

"Understatement of the century," Gary grumbled under his breath.

Lily and Ash got comfortable against Snorlax's thick fur, and she reveled at the softness as she sank into the big Pokémon, sighing. Ash's hat sank lower over her eyes.

"You guys think this storm'll break tomorrow?" Ash said as he shared some of his jerky dinner with the two Pikachu.

"Let's hope so," Ivy said with a yawn.

"Depends on if it's natural or not," Lily said.

Ash eyed her askance. "Why wouldn't it be natural?"

"Well, there's some Pokémon that can make it storm like this. Scaly can make huge whirlpools when he yawns, did you know that?"

"Huh, that's pretty cool."

"Pretty scary," Ivy said.

"So, what kinda Pokémon can make it storm like this?" Ash wondered aloud.

"I dunno," Lily said.

"...Let's just try to get some sleep." Gary settled against Arcanine.

The big canine wagged its fluffy tail and let its eyes droop. Lily yawned and pulled Ash's hat lower over her eyes as she turned onto her side to lean against Snorlax. Her hand brushed Ash's arm, and a subtle pulse of body heat passed between them. The warmth and the rumbling brontide soon lulled her to sleep despite the uneven floor beneath her, and she dreamed of storms and the sea.

When Lily woke next, it was to a sound like wailing in her ears. She jerked awake and winced at the soreness in her lower back from

having slept sitting up on a hard surface.

What was that?

Ash's arm lay across her lap as he slept, a lash of warmth in the dank, dark cave. A blush heated her cheeks at the comforting weight of him, and she gingerly pushed his hand until she was free to stand up. Outside, the rain still fell but the winds seemed to have died down. She had no watch, but judging from the darkness that permeated the cave, it had to be very late. She still wore Ash's hat, so she removed it and shook out her bangs before gently placing it in his lap to find when he woke up.

Her eyes weren't accustomed to seeing in the dark, but Pikachu yawned and slowly woke up, having lost its human pillow when Lily stood up.

"Hey, ChuChu," she whispered, kneeling down. "I could use your light."

Pikachu shook itself out and hopped up onto Lily's outstretched arm. She petted the little rodent in thanks, earning herself a warm lick on the cheek from its rough, pink tongue.

The same wailing that had woken her up drifted up from the bowels of the volcanic cave again, languorous and mournful.

I didn't imagine it.

No one else stirred, and while Lily had half a mind to wake them in case the moaning was a source of danger, she decided against it. She could handle herself, after all, couldn't she? And it was probably nothing, just a trick of the winds that still sang outside as the storm passed overhead. But now that she was wide awake, there was no sense in not exploring just a little. What was the worst that could happen?

She stepped lightly, but paused at her pack. Adventure and curiosity were all well and good, but she wasn't stupid. She fished around her pack and pulled out a Hyper Potion and a couple spare Pokéballs, just in case. As a final check, she patted the thick knife holstered at her thigh, one Ivy had given her from the many the older girl carried on her person at all times. Lily paused to glance at Gary and Ivy through the gloom. Sometime in the night they'd curled up together, drawn by the need for body heat. She was pressed against his chest with her head under his chin, and his arm secured her in place behind

Houndoom. Lily smiled to herself and scratched Pikachu behind the ear.

Something clogged the air and obscured her vision just then, and she watched as a pair of glowing, red eyes descended on the slumbering Gary and Ivy with shadow claws. She gasped.

"Gengar!" she hissed softly enough so as not to wake the others.

The Ghost pulled back and solidified on the ground, and it spared her a glance just before it reached for Gary and Ivy, presumably to give them a scare while they slept.

"Cut that out!"

Gengar frowned dramatically and trudged toward her. She leaned on her knees so that they were at eye level.

"Hey, don't gimme that frowny face. Wanna come check out that creepy moaning sound with me instead?"

As if on cue, the groaning echoed from the depths of the cavern in a sorrowful, single-note tune. Gengar immediately perked up, drawn by its natural curiosity and anything that promised some spooky fun.

"Thought so," Lily said, smiling triumphantly. "C'mon, stay close, okay?"

Delighted to be going on another adventure with the Yellow Girl-Human so soon, Gengar flashed its trademark Cheshire smile and bounded along beside Lily. Once they were a safe distance from the others, she scratched Pikachu's muzzle.

"How about some light, ChuChu?"

Pikachu squeaked and charged up weak static electricity. Its fur stood on end and began to glow and vibrate. Better than any flashlight, Pikachu emitted a glow bright enough to light the way ten feet in all directions. The odd trio set off again, careful to avoid the cracks in the ceiling where water dripped down and the deep pools of rainwater that, if tripped over, could easily break a leg or worse.

The cave smelled of petrichor and soot, the way a campfire smells when water is poured over it to douse the flames and turn the ashes and cinders to grey soup. Through the crags in the ceiling, she could make out the rains and dark skies overhead. There was a muted, silver

glow emanating through breaks in the storm clouds where the moon fought hard to shine through, offering the barest natural light. Gengar made a game of jumping from puddle to puddle, its incorporeal feet barely rippling the water's surface.

The moaning sound grew louder, and Lily put a hand over her heart. There was something despairing about the sound, but beautiful too.

I wonder why the others didn't wake up?

The thought was neither here nor there as she made her way forward through the natural caves. "How'd these caves even get here?"

She ran her hand along the smooth wall, like black glass folded in on itself a thousand times over. Ripples in the wall stretched the length of it, as though something had blown through here but wind and water and time had smoothed the ridges. It went on like that seemingly for miles, and soon she was sure she'd been walking for hours. Smaller tunnels branched out from the main one, but they disappeared below ground and into black water. Even with Pikachu's radiant glow, she couldn't hope to see the bottom. Perhaps they reached to the bottom of the sea. She shivered a little at the thought.

Just then, the groaning she'd been following ricocheted off the walls like it was all around her. She covered her ears, startled, and Gengar even paused its queer hopscotch game to listen, wary. The rumbling song, a dirge in notes that were disconnected with no identifiable tune, emanated just ahead. Swallowing, she looked down at Gengar.

"Well, we came this far. What do you say?"

Gengar grinned and its disembodied cackling echoed in the cave. Lily smiled.

"You sure are brave. Guess whatever it is can't really hurt you, though, being a Ghost and all." She took a deep breath. "Okay, let's check it out."

Lily crept forward with one hand on the wall, but water splashing underfoot startled her. The cave opened up into a wide cavern filled with water. She waded into the shallows at the mouth, but it soon dropped off into deeper, black and blue waters that she dared not test. But the source of the mournful tune arrested her attention, mind and body, and she couldn't have moved any farther even if she'd wanted to. Curled up in the water with its large head lolling in the shallower waters to rest against the submerged rock sat a long, serpentine

creature with a hide of shimmering, periwinkle scales as fine as mother-of-pearl under Pikachu's light. Fins grew just over its ear holes and extended up like horns, pale and fleshy. Dark eyes stirred and it caught sight of Lily frozen just a few feet away.

Her breath hitched as the beast lifted its head, which was as large around as her own, and opened its moist mouth and revealed a row of small, sharp teeth and a slimy, turquoise tongue. It growled, the same sorrowful song she'd followed all the way here, and Lily had to shield her ears at this proximity. Pikachu sparked in warning at her shoulder, and Gengar just stood there, curious but not enough to get any closer.

"No way," she managed once the beast's wail died down again. "A real-life Dratini!"

Dratini was half submerged in the water, but judging from the size of its head and the thickness of its body, Lily guessed it must be at least six feet long, large for its species. There were sometimes reports of sightings of the elusive Dragon and its evolved kin in these waters, but they were few and far between. Dratini kept to the deep waters, or so Lily had thought. She remembered the markings along the cave walls. Could it have been Dratini and its ilk that had carved through the mass of volcanic rock and glass to make this sheltered sanctuary?

The water around the beached Dratini frothed as it swished its long tail, and a dark violet-blue substance clouded the water around it.

"Oh no, you're bleeding. Lemme take a look."

Lily waded into the water a little deeper, and Pikachu jumped off her shoulder to remain on land. Dratini shifted its head and made another wailing sound. The water in the cavern began to churn, but not from the motions of its injured tail, and Lily abruptly stopped, awed.

"Are you doing that? But how?"

The small, silver gem on Dratini's forehead glowed faintly, making its dark eyes glisten with power and primal fear, and Lily understood.

"The storm, like in my dream... That was you?"

One Dratini couldn't possibly be the cause of the hellish storm, though. It had to be a colony living here somewhere. And yet, this one was all alone. Swallowing her own trepidations, Lily put out her shaking hands and did her best to smile.

"It's okay, I'm not gonna hurt you. In fact..." She reached round her waist and plucked the Hyper Potion she'd pocketed from her utility belt. "I think I can help. You're hurt, and this'll make you feel better, see?" She showed Dratini the neon liquid that shone with a light of its own in the glass bottle.

Dratini didn't seem to care or understand and continued to thrash, further irritating its wound. Lily waded deeper until the water was up to her waist over Pikachu's frantic squeaking. Gengar had dissolved the lower half of its body and hovered at the shore, red eyes narrowed dangerously at the wounded Dragon. Lily stopped again, afraid to irritate Dratini any further. She couldn't risk approaching like this, when it could easily attack and drown her.

"Well, if you won't take my word for it, maybe you'll take Scaly's."

She released Kingdra into the deep pool, and the sea Dragon poked its head above water, yellow eyes shifting between the cavern's occupants. Dratini wailed again, and the water began to churn more furiously. Kingdra rose up in the water and exposed its flat head.

"Scaly, calm him down or something!" Lily shouted over Dratini's cries.

Kingdra hovered in the water, unperturbed, and right before her eyes, the churning died down as the water began to swirl in a gentle whirlpool. Dratini tried to lift its head higher, but it stopped its crying and just watched, eyes wide and fearful. Lily saw it as her chance, and she waded closer to Dratini. Before the serpentine Dragon could lash out, she laid her hand flat against its slick, scaled hide and ran her fingers over it. The water was up to her shoulders now.

"There you go, it's okay," she soothed the stressed Dragon.

Dratini peered at her from the side, and emboldened, Lily reached for one of the fins at its head. The flesh was thicker than she would have expected as she ran her fingers lightly over the turquoise bones that fanned out under porous skin.

"You're gonna be okay, I promise."

Dratini watched her like a hawk, but something in her touch must have eased its nerves enough for it to lay its head back down on the rocky shore. Maintaining contact, Lily returned her attention to Kingdra.

"Help me push him outta the water, but be gentle."

Kingdra swam toward Dratini, and the water moved with it. In gentle waves, the sentient water sloshed against Dratini and slowly pushed it higher onto the shore. As more of its long body was exposed, Lily finally got a look at the ugly gash in its side. The cut was at least a foot long and deep. Blue blood leaked freely from it and pooled on the rocks once it was out of the water. Dratini wailed again, but it was weaker now. It was losing energy and blood fast. With Kingdra's help, Lily climbed back out of the water and kneeled on the stone shore. She pulled out the stopper on the Hyper Potion with her teeth and spat it out. Gengar hovered on the water's surface next to her, nosy as ever and attracted by the smell of blood and hurt.

Dratini tried to curl in on itself when it saw the Ghost and the strange medicine Lily wielded, but she laid a hand on it and held its gaze. "Hey, it's okay. You know what I am, right? I'm gonna help you. Just hold still for a bit, and it'll be over before you know it."

Perhaps it recognized her Titan heritage, the blood of its own blood, or perhaps it was too exhausted to fight back against both Gengar and Kingdra. Either way, Dratini hung its head again and let its eyes droop, spent. Lily took that as the okay to continue and dumped the Hyper Potion's contents over the gaping wound. The luminescent liquid was immediately absorbed into Dratini's flesh and bonded with the ripped up muscle and bone. Before her eyes, tendons knit back together and bones reset themselves, spurred along by the Hyper Potion's invigorating catalyst.

"Man, I love science," Lily said with a triumphant smile.

Soon, Dratini was passed out as the Hyper Potion worked its magic. Kingdra floated up next to her, and she patted the large Pokémon on its snout.

"I wonder how you got hurt?" she mused aloud as she gazed over Dratini. It was just shy of seven feet in length, monstrous for its species, or perhaps just quite old. "Was it the storm?"

She slid closer to examine the Dragon and ran her hand over its smooth scales again, marveling at their beauty. Upon closer examination of its head, however, a strange, bulbous growth at its throat gave her pause.

"What's that?"

She touched the engorged tumor and found it warm to the touch. It swirled under her touch, like it was alive all on its own. Aside from its cut, Dratini didn't look to be sick or otherwise impaired. Maybe Gary would know what it was, she decided. But she couldn't just leave Dratini here, vulnerable to predators.

"I could catch you..."

She was a Dragon Tamer, after all, and it wasn't like anyone else had a claim to this particular Dratini. It would need time to recover its strength, and in the meantime while it was mysteriously separated from its colony, it would be in danger. She didn't even bother to bite back the smile that curled upon her lips. She selected one of the empty Pokéballs she'd brought along and touched it against Dratini's side, where it dissolved into red light and then disappeared within the Pokéball. The release button flashed a couple times before falling dark.

Gengar and Pikachu looked at her quizzically, while Kingdra blew bubbles in the water. Lily tested the Pokéball's weight in her hands.

"I think I'll call you Tiny," she said, laughing a little.

Gengar peered at her and blinked. It didn't understand why she was laughing, but the sound made it grin along with her all the same.

Ivy woke up equal parts sore from slouching awkwardly against Arcanine on the hard ground and warm from the cradle of heat surrounding her. A haze like wet wool clouded her senses as the fuzzy warmth made her head spin pleasantly. Braving the hard floor since the damage was already done, she snuggled closer to the source of it in front of her. The arm around her waist pulled her closer, and a soft exhale tickled her hair. But Arcanine and Houndoom didn't have arms.

She was instantly wide awake and keenly aware of the dull ache in her lower back and thighs, as well as the strong arms that held her close. Gary snoozed practically on top of her, locking her in place against his chest. Once the initial shock passed, a thousand thoughts flooded her imagination. This had to be an accident. Plenty of times while they traveled, she would wake up pressed against him for warmth and comfort as their bodies sought the closest heat source in the night. That was before they'd become lovers, and now after the fact it was no big deal. But with the way he'd been acting ever since Saffron, the voice in her head screamed to get up before things got

worse between them. Give him time, Ash had advised her. Somehow, waking up to find his arms around her didn't seem like the best way to give Gary time.

So she slowly extricated herself from his grip. Arcanine and Houndoom woke up when she moved, and Gary in turn opened bleary eyes eyes, blinking, just as she let his hand fall from her thigh. But just as she was about to get up, he grabbed her wrist and forced her to remain slumped against Arcanine.

"Stay," he said softly.

"Gary..."

He moved his hand from her wrist to her hand, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. "Please, stay."

She could only stare. He had to be still dreaming. Only weeks ago, he was all but disgusted with her and what she'd done in Saffron. Setting her jaw, Ivy pulled away.

"I'm getting up," she said, standing.

Houndoom got up with her and shook itself out. She petted it at the base of its right horn, and the hellhound panted and wagged its whip-like tail. Stretching out, Ivy wandered to her pack and rummaged around for something to eat. Outside, the rain seemed to have let up and taken the winds with it. Gary slowly rose and stretched and recalled Arcanine. Ivy felt his eyes on her back, but she said nothing.

A yawning sound drew her attention to Ash. "Man, I can't feel my butt," he groaned. "Next time I should sleep on *top* of Snorlax."

Snorlax, however, was content to continue sleeping the day away. Ash patted its girth and recalled it to its Pokéball.

"...Hey, where's Lily?" he said, donning his cap that she'd been wearing when Ivy last saw her.

"She wandered off?" Gary said.

"Well, she and ChuChu aren't here, and I don't see any sign of her back there." Ivy peered into the inky blackness of the volcanic cave, but even as far as she could see in the dark, there was no sign of Lily.

"Looks like she took Gengar," Ash said, pointing deeper into the cave.

"That way."

"How do you know?" Gary asked.

"There's no way she got past Snorlax. But also, I can see Gengar's trail. We never actually separate." He held out an arm for Pikachu. "You guys comin'?"

Ivy had fished out some energy bars from her pack and tossed one each to Gary and Ash. "We'll eat on the way."

The trio headed down the dark cavern with Ash and a glowing Pikachu in the lead, followed by Ivy, while Gary brought up the rear. Houndoom took the opportunity to drink from one of the freshwater pools filled by the rain as they went. As they went, Ivy could feel Gary's eyes on her back, though he said nothing. Not for the first time, she wished she could get a glimpse into what he was thinking. For all his Clairvoyance, he had no sense of timing.

They plodded along the cave, and Ivy let her hand scrape against the smooth walls. "It feels like something carved out this tunnel. Lava doesn't do this naturally, right?"

"Probably not," Gary said.

"Then what was it?"

No one answered, and Ivy suppressed a shiver. It wasn't long before shadows danced within Pikachu's generated light, long and smoky, and Ivy stopped.

"Ash, hold up," Gary said, reaching for a Pokéball at his belt.

Pikachu leaped off Ash's shoulder and bounded down the tunnel without warning. "Hey, Pika! Wait for me!"

Ash jogged after it, leaving Ivy and Gary and Houndoom in the dark.

"It's like he doesn't even hear me," Gary said. "Unbelievable."

"Is it really, though?" Ivy rolled her eyes.

"C'mon, before we lose him."

He grabbed her hand and dragged her along, chasing Pikachu's receding light. Ivy ran alongside him and led him around the various hazards in the path that he couldn't see in the dark, his hand heavy

and warm in hers. She tried not to think about it.

"...doin' all the way back here?"

Ivy sped up and followed Ash's voice. They ran past branching tunnels that disappeared into the water, depthless even to her keen eyes. Her feet grew tired and sore as they pounded over the uneven lava rock, and finally they came upon Ash and Lily in a drowned cavern. Lily was soaking wet with her goggles pulled down around her neck as she chatted animatedly with Ash.

"It just keeps going and going! I think it must go to the bottom of the sea, but I had to come up after a couple minutes since I can't hold my breath that long, you know?"

With both Pikachu lighting the cavern and shafts of sunlight streaming through the few cracks in the ceiling, there was plenty of light to illuminate the entire cavern. Ivy stopped just short of the water, but Gary walked forward and pulled her along up to their mid calves. Ash and Lily stood farther out up to their waists, and Kingdra waded in the deeper water blowing bubbles and keeping one auriferous eye on Lily as it floated in silence.

"But why'd you come back here? I woke up and you were gone," Ash said, fiddling with the bill of his hat.

"Hm? Oh, right, sorry about Gengar. I didn't wanna tell him to stay behind and miss out on the fun."

Gengar, who had returned to Ash and now hovered over his shoulders, cackled in delight. The rotted skull it toted around clacked its disconnected jaw as it guffawed along with the Ghost. Ash's expression softened.

"Nah, I'm glad you don't mind Gengar hangin' around. Just wake me up next time or something. We dunno what's back here."

Lily smiled shyly up at him, and Ivy let go of Gary's hand.

"Why'd you dive down there? How did you even think to come back here?" she asked.

"Well, I heard this crying sound. It was kinda like a sad song, and it woke me up. So I followed it here."

Ivy and Gary exchanged a look.

"I didn't hear anything," he said.

"What was it? A Pokémon?" Ash said.

Lily grinned wider. "Yeah. He was crying because he was hurt and alone, so I patched him up and caught him." She held out a Pokéball and showed them all. "I nicknamed him Tiny."

"Of course you did," Gary said.

Ash peered down at the offered Pokéball. "So, what is it?"

"Well, he's still healing..."

"Oh, c'mon, Lily," Ivy said. "It's not like it can go anywhere while it's hurt."

"I guess. But don't freak out, okay?"

Ivy frowned, but before anyone could question her, Lily tossed out the Pokéball and a bright light flashed.

"Holy mother of—"

Ivy covered her gaping mouth, and for once Ash had nothing to say. A Dratini as long as Crobat was tall stretched out on the sunken shoreline, breathing deeply. Lily laid a hand on its head, and the serpentine Dragon's dark eye settled on her.

"So, yeah, I caught a Dratini. Neat, huh?"

Dratini's tail was slashed up but healing quickly thanks to the treatment Lily had given it. The Dragon lifted its head to better see Lily and blinked its dark eye, first the filmy inner lid and then the outer armored one.

"You're okay, Tiny," she said, stroking it just behind its ear hole.

Gary stepped forward, eyes wide. "Incredible. It must be almost seven feet long."

Ivy produced her Pokédex and scanned Dratini. "There's hardly any information here... Hmm, except that there've been sightings of Dratini in small colonies around the Seafoam Islands, but the accounts are pretty rare." She snapped the Pokédex shut. "How the hell did you find one?"

"You know something? I think he kinda found me."

"Oh my god," Gary said, itching to get closer but wary of Dratini's careful gaze.

"What?" Ash said. "You can't just say 'oh my god' around a freakin' Dratini, man."

"No, the bulb on its throat."

"Oh yeah, I wanted to ask you about that. Any idea what it is?" Lily asked.

"Yeah, Dragonair have a giant pearl that grows under a thin layer of flesh at their throat. Gramps had one back in his lab—the pearl, I mean. S'posed to be worth a crap ton. It's what they use to make Max Potions."

"Dragonair, like Dratini's evolved form?" Ivy said.

"Yeah. Which means—"

"—he's gonna evolve soon!" Ash blurted out.

Without warning, Dratini reared up in the water and flared out its finned horns.

"Tiny, wait!"

Lily grabbed onto the small dorsal fin just below its neck, and Dratini dove headfirst into the pool. Kingdra made a gurgling sound and dove after the slender Dragon and its trainer.

"Oh, *shit*," Ivy said.

"Lily!" Ash waded farther out into the water.

Both Pikachu squeaked frantically and scampered around the shoreline. Houndoom growled low in its throat, sensing the tension in the air. But Ash was quick to toss out Blastoise's Pokéball and point to the depths of the cavern pool.

Gary went pale. "Ash, *don't*—"

But Ash grabbed onto Blastoise, pulled up the goggles around his neck, and dove underwater without a second look back before either Gary or Ivy could stop him. Only Gengar's disembodied cackling

echoed behind him until there was not even a ripple in the deep water to mark his ever having been there at all.

For a couple seconds, Ivy and Gary just stood there in shock. Until Gary slammed a fist in the water and swore.

"Goddamnit!"

Ivy rushed after him and pulled him back by the shoulders before he could get any dumb ideas like dive in after them.

"Gary, hey! Look at me!"

Wild, green eyes met hers, and she held his face in her hands.

"Look at me," she said again.

He stared at her, unseeing for a couple breaths, but his anger left him with each passing second. He slid his hands over hers and held them to the sides of his face.

"If Golduck was still alive, I could help them."

Like someone had lifted the wool from her eyes, Ivy finally saw what was happening to him, what had been happening ever since the Siege of Saffron. His hands trembled over hers, hanging on for dear life, and she could have cried. But she didn't. Instead, she set her jaw and rubbed her thumbs over his temples.

"They'll be okay, don't worry."

"How the hell can you say that? They're underwater with a *Dragon*!"

"Because Lily's the smartest person I know, and Ash is the most stubborn. There's no way they won't figure a way outta this, you know that."

He blinked and tears welled in his eyes, unbidden. She'd never seen him like this, so lost, so broken up.

"*How're you not afraid of the dark?"* he'd whispered to her in the cover of night, meager and lonely and afraid of her answer.

How long has he been like this?

"We're gonna find them, you and me, okay?"

His breathing evened out a little, and he lowered their hands to his chest but didn't let her go. "How do you know that?"

"'Cause you're the best Clairvoyant I know, no exceptions. And me, well, I'll be right there with you. You trust me, don't you?"

He watched her for a long, long time, holding on, afraid to let go. "Ivy...I'm sorry. Everything, I...I'm so sorry." His voice cracked as he tried to hold onto some semblance of self-control.

She swallowed the lump in her throat and fought a wince at the twisting pain that stung her eyes. "Later, okay? Let's find those two idiots first."

He let her lead him back to dry land, where both Pikachu darted about their feet, chittering frantically. Houndoom whined, and Ivy recalled him to his Pokéball after a reassuring pat on the head. Gary sat down across from Ivy and shakily selected two Pokéballs from his belt. In a flash of light, Espeon and Alakazam coalesced and took a moment to study their surroundings. Ivy took his hands in hers, their crossed knees touching, as she tried to ignore Alakazam and focus on Gary.

"Show me Ash and Lily," Gary commanded.

Alakazam and Espeon sat down next to Gary while the two Pikachu gathered behind Ivy. The two Psychics pulsed with invisible energy that sent an unpleasant itch down Ivy's arms, but she again ignored it and closed her eyes. The world came alive in the darkness as she saw with Gary's third eye through the Psychics he commanded, and together they dove into the deep into the drowned caverns beneath the Seafoam Islands.

Lily's eyes stung with salt as she squinted through the inky, cold blackness and held onto Dratini for dear life. The lithe Dragon slithered like a snake through the sunken caverns, somehow able to see when Lily could not. Her hand slipped on its scaly hide as a layer of skin molted and was cast off behind them. She'd only barely sucked in a deep breath before Dratini dragged her underwater, but right now fear of the darkness and drowning was more pressing than the pressure in her lungs.

Shafts of deep, aquamarine light filtered down from above where breaks in the undersea cavern let the sunlight in. If she wasn't in extreme fear of drowning, she may have appreciated the delicate

beauty of the light as it reached for the darkness of the seafloor and illuminated treasures long lost to the outside world. Shellder huddled on the seafloor surrounded by long lost galleons and pearls, diamonds and sapphires, ropes of silver and chains of gold from the old trading galleys that had once navigated these waters centuries ago, perhaps even before this island had breached the surface. And all of it, hollowed out by the Dratini and Dragonair that lived deep underneath it, hidden from the world. Lily's ears screamed with the water pressure from the three atmospheres Dratini had dragged her under, but she held on and Dratini didn't shake her off.

She almost lost her grip when Dratini suddenly banked up and swam nearly vertical toward the surface. At least, she thought it was the surface. Her oxygen-deprived brain could no longer tell up from down as it diverted all resources to maintaining her grip on Dratini and not gagging on seawater. Her lungs screamed in pain, and Lily bit down on her tongue hard enough to draw blood to keep herself from opening her mouth and gagging. The only sound was the seawater rushing past her, and an ominous roaring that trailed behind, catching up.

I'm going to die here, she thought.

For the second time in under a month, she faced her own mortality, and this time Ash wasn't there to save her. In a desperate and possibly futile attempt to save herself, she wrapped her legs around Dratini's middle and squeezed, buried her face in its scaled back, and wished with all her heart that it would hear her inner screaming. Even with her eyes squeezed shut, the sudden flare of light seared her retinas just then, and she was sure she'd passed out, this was the end. Dratini's muscled body slithered beneath her, powerful despite its healing injury, and she finally gagged, unable to hold off any longer.

Only it wasn't seawater that filled her lungs, but stale air. The rushing sound was gone and her ears rung, waterlogged. She sucked in another breath, and another, disbelieving that she could possible be alive after all that. Under her hands, Dratini slithered along the water's surface like a snake over sand. Slowly, Lily's eyes adjusted after the inundation of saltwater, and she rubbed them clean to get a better look.

The cavern was far larger than the one she'd been in before, with gaping holes in the ceiling that let in the light and warmed the shallower waters. Deep pools surrounded the main one and led to winding undersea tunnels. The water frothed next to her, and Kingdra

emerged.

"Scaly," she croaked. "You followed me?"

Kingdra swam up next to her, and she slipped into the water with one hand on Dratini. The serpentine Dragon lazily swam toward the rocky shore and slithered out of the water, dragging Lily with it. A loud but soothing cry filled the cavern like a song, mournful and beautiful as it reverberated in her bones, and she finally looked around.

The water splashed, and Ash emerged just then with Blastoise and Gengar, who had cloaked him in its Aura to help him resist the water's pressure. He sputtered, and Blastoise carried him to shore.

"Lily," he said upon laying eyes on her. "Oh my god, are you okay? I thought you'd drowned!"

Lily didn't even look at him as she held out a hand for silence, eyes raised and mouth agape. Ash frowned up at her as he hauled himself up onto the shore in between Blastoise and her, and he turned to face where she was looking.

"...Holy fuck."

A thirty-foot long Dragonite lounged on the lava rock and slowly pushed itself up with its webbed front legs. Its claws, each as long as a sword, dug into the long cooled magma and cut through it like it was no more than loose soil. It opened its huge maw and yawned, revealing a row sharp teeth longer than her forearm that sent a spike of fear through Lily's heart. It was big enough to swallow a fully-grown Tauros whole. Roughly twenty Dragonair and Dratini surrounded it, either partially submerged in the pools or sunbathing under one of the natural skylights in the ceiling. A few of them opened their eyes to look upon the newcomers, but none made any threatening moves. Yet.

Ash wordlessly took out his Pokédex and scanned the Dragonair and Dragonite, not even bothering to read the entries as he failed to tear his eyes from the beasts.

"Tiny," Lily said, patting her Dratini's back. "This must be your colony."

Dratini slithered around and settled over her lap in a coiled loop. The engorged pearl at its throat pulsed dully with a silver light, and its eyes drooped. Another layer of scaly skin began to molt and slough

away in the lapping waves. Kingdra remained close by, its yellow eyes trained carefully on the lone Dragonite as the latter blinked and finally fixed its dark eyes upon Lily and Ash.

"Lily?" Ash whispered as he pocketed the Pokédex.

"Yeah?"

"I feel like we're intruding."

Dragonite bared its wicked fangs in another yawn and stretched its massive, blue wings. It spread webbed feet over the rock, each as large as a Snorlax's, and its thick tail slowly slipped into the main pool with a splash. Kingdra bubbled and rose up in the water. The two Dragons stared each other down in silence until a pair of Dragonair slipped into the water and slithered toward Kingdra, throat pearls glowing. The waters began to churn, and the sunlight filtering through the cavern's ceiling flickered. Dratini lifted its head from Lily's lap and twitched its head fins, suddenly alert.

"Uh, Lily?" Ash said, voice strained.

Blastoise hunkered down on all fours, cannons at the ready as it eyed the encroaching Dragonair.

Lily stood up. "No, don't attack them." She raised a hand toward the Dragonite across the pool. "We didn't mean to disturb your colony. Tiny brought me here by surprise."

Dragonite growled low in its throat, and its orange scales glistened in the sunlight, magnificent. She could hardly look away.

This is the kind of Dragon Lance can command.

She didn't even know her fellow Titan, but just being near this wild Dragonite was enough to humble her. The idea of commanding something so noble and fierce...it was unthinkable.

Dratini opened its mouth and let out a short but sorrowful growl that sounded more like a song than any guttural roar. Whatever it did, Dragonite lumbered toward the water and slipped in. Ash stood up and grabbed Lily's hand.

"Hey, I'm sure I'll look back on this and think it's pretty cool, but right now I think we better get the hell outta here before we're Dragon chow."

Lily squeezed his hand but didn't look at him as she kept her gaze on Dragonite. "No, not yet."

"Lily, look, I get the Dragon Tamer thing, but that thing's gonna—"

"It won't hurt us," she said with confidence she wasn't sure she had. "Do you trust me?"

Ash looked between Lily and the approaching Dragonite, whose dark eyes reflected no light. "Well...sure, but—"

Kingdra reared up, and a small whirlpool eddied around it as it glared at Dragonite. But Lily put a hand out.

"Scaly, no. Let it come."

Kingdra didn't back off, but it made no move to attack Dragonite and the many Dragonair and Dratini that surrounded it. Lily's Dratini slithered forward, and she kept a hand on its hide just shy of the sealed and scarred wound on its tail.

Dragonite reared up in the water and planted its massive claws in the rock, crunching it like ice cubes. Ash gripped Lily's hand so hard it hurt. And when Dragonite opened its mouth and sang a mournful, baritone note that echoed seemingly for miles, Dratini echoed it as best it could. Lily held her breath, heart pounding, when Dragonite slowly shifted its dark gaze to her. Maybe it was the seawater she'd swallowed or the lack of oxygen that made her brain turn to mush after the deep dive, but she reached out with her free hand and brushed Dragonite's snout. It was cold to the touch and a little slimy, but the breath that huffed through its nostril holes was hot like the sun that had bathed it before she woke it up. And by some stroke of insanity or perhaps an empathy that lived somewhere deep inside in places she'd never bothered to look, she smiled through the fresh tears that began to fall down her salt-kissed cheeks.

It was over before she had a chance to blink, and the wild Dragonair and Dratini slipped below the water's surface. Dragonite pulled away and gripped the rocky shore for leverage, then pushed itself skyward with one powerful leap. Blue, leathery wings spread and slashed downward, kicking up air and a torrent of water that soaked Lily, Ash, and their Pokémon anew. Lily covered her eyes and squinted through the sunlight overhead just as Dragonite rose through one of the skylights and shot into the sky, gone in a flash.

She watched the sky where it had disappeared, grinning through her

tears and unable to form coherent thoughts.

"Lily, hey!"

Ash's voice brought her back to reality, and she met his eyes. "Huh?"

"Look, it's Tiny."

Lily looked down at her Dragon, curled up around her feet, and her grin faded. She kneeled down and cradled its heavy head in her arms as best she could. Kingdra huffed, and a small tidal wave sloshed over the shoreline, soaking Lily and Ash all over again.

"What's happening?" she said as Dratini closed its eyes and went rigid.

Ash kneeled down next to her, while Gengar hovered overhead and Blastoise waded next to Kingdra, waiting. "I dunno."

The water in the cavern began to churn and froth, and the many pools surrounding the main lagoon burst like geysers, showering Ash and Lily.

"What's happening!" she shouted over the roar.

Ash's reply was lost in the din, and a flash of brilliant, white light blinded them both.

The deep blue was as dark as any night, and colder still. Gary's body remained crouched upon damp lava rock, but his mind raced on invisible wings through the undersea cavern, blind if not for his Psychics' intuitive guidance. They hunted after Ash, the Ghost shadow that followed him blood curdling and easy to track even in the inky blackness and pressurized chill of the submerged cavern. Its tunnels, like so many honeycomb passages hollowed out by the denizens of the deep, wound and twisted without rhyme or reason, and every passing second sent Gary's stomach and sanity churning the farther he pushed Alakazam's and Espeon's sight.

But the weight of Ivy's hands in his reminded him that he hadn't moved at all, that he was still breathing. And the darkness wasn't so terrifying so long as it was on his side.

Vision came in flashes, as transient as the filtered sunlight that penetrated the darkness in shafts, fingers of light that scraped over long lost treasures and the remains of those who were long lost with

it. Slumbering Shellder and Cloyster, if they sensed his wandering eye, paid him no mind. Eyes even his Psychics couldn't see, watchers in the pelagic night leagues below and worlds away, followed him through the vespertine maze, their gazes like a million bugs crawling over his naked skin. These Islands held secrets perhaps better left buried, as the treasure hunters that had once combed these treacherous waters may have learned to their doom.

The caves were too numerous to count, and Gary whizzed by and through them almost too fast to take notice. All the atolls brought up from the submerged volcanoes were connected, he realized, in a network of hollowed passages. Had the Dragons done this? Or was there another responsible, something older and even further lost to myth and legend? Answers he would never know, nor did he care to know so long as Ivy's hands kept him still and on his feet even as his mind wretched and his blood ran cold the longer he stayed under.

Light, just ahead (or above?), and the Psychics chose to follow it, perhaps as starved for it as he was wandering the dead labyrinth. It was bright and warm when he burst through the water's surface, invisible as a dream, but there was no mistaking Gengar's odor. Espeon and Alakazam recoiled from its unfiltered rot, and for a brief second those lurid eyes saw him in his dream, ever sneering and laughing as if to say, *'I found you!'*, as if it were a game, as if it *was* all a dream in the end, and there were only Ghosts at the end of this mad tunnel and there had been only Them for thousands of years.

But Ivy's hands in his pulled him back from the Ghost's noxious presence, untamed and odious in dreams where Ash could not follow, could not rein it in and play it off like *there's no such thing as Ghosts*. He was falling, falling like he had in Lavender when Jessie and James attacked him, when the floor burst under his feet and the Tartarean abyss swallowed him whole, where demons and dead things dwelled. Cold, wet, deep-sea darkness closed in all around as Alakazam and Espeon pulled him back screaming, but the water swallowed them all. Ivy's hands in his, on his shoulders, clutching his face and shouting, *I'm here, I'm here!*

That's right, he thought as he choked on the dream-water and the real water (what's the difference, again?). *She's here, too.*

He opened his eyes to darkness, curling and hungry as it bled from her eyes, leaked from her mouth, grew behind her in talons and quills and sharp things, and he saw it now, what Sabrina had seen in her. What Koga had seen in him. No wonder they screamed. No wonder they

shuddered in fear.

Monster, monster, monster, their voices swirled in his head, clear as day.

"*We're all monsters."*

"We're all monsters," he heard his own voice whisper in the back of his throat, accusatory.

Her hands on his face were cool, and like that first breath of air after so long underwater, her voice reached him clearly. Brilliant, blue eyes pierced through the darkness and found his, and the wraiths that haunted her faded back to the shadows, demons untamed but kept as close as a lover.

"Gary," she was saying. "Come back, Gary."

He blinked groggily and tried to say something, anything, but the words jumbled up in his throat. He stared down at her, and she said his name again, shaking him a little.

His hands, limp in his lap, found her waist and pulled her close until they tumbled backward together on the damp rock. She made a muffled sound of protest and squirmed on top of him, but he held on and buried his face in the crook of her neck, in her soft hair that smelled like the wind and the clouds. Bleary-eyed, he watched the shadows where the light didn't reach, fancying movement therein, but he only held her closer.

"Gary," she said softly next to his ear. "Hey."

"You were right," he murmured into her neck, half-lidded eyes watching the shade and shadow all around them where the two Pikachu's light failed to reach. "I'm not afraid anymore."

Alakazam and Espeon sat silently beside them, their thoughts aflutter, but Gary had never been more at peace than he was in this moment lying on the hard, jagged floor, damp and in the gloom, with Ivy's weight holding him still. She pushed herself up enough to look down on him, and her thick hair fell about him in a veil that shielded them from the world.

"Gary..."

It was almost a question waiting for an answer, and he curled his

fingers through her hair and traced the line of her temple with a thumb. But the moment ended all too soon when Ash's Pikachu nipped Gary's ear and squeaked.

"Ow!"

Ivy rolled off him and bit back a chortle at his expense. She got to her feet and helped him up. Espeon immediately rubbed up against his leg and purred, while Alakazam remained motionless.

"Can you find them?" Ivy asked. "All I saw was Gengar for a bit, then nothing."

Gary rubbed his sore ear and glared down at Pikachu. "Yeah, I know where they are. It's another island a few miles from here." He held out a hand to her. "Teleporting will be faster than flying."

She hesitated, but he took her hand.

"Trust me."

"Gary, I don't know..."

He flashed her a smirk, the one he knew made her blush, and she didn't disappoint. "I think I do now. So please."

She swallowed and nodded once, her hand tightening in his. "Of course I trust you. I always have."

They both looked to Alakazam, who came up to their shoulders at its full height.

You wanted to see for yourself, Gary thought.

Alakazam held out its three-fingered hands, one for Gary and one for Ivy, sunken eyes unblinking. Gary accepted the offered hand and waited for Ivy to comply. After a moment's hesitation, she laid her hand over the silver spoon in Alakazam's other hand. The two Pikachu leaped onto their shoulders, while Espeon sat at Alakazam's feet, barely half its height.

"What's it saying?" Ivy said, her eyes glued to Alakazam's hand in her own.

"That it's ready if you are."

She looked up and smiled a little. "Yeah...okay, let's go."

In the blink of an eye, the cavern faded from sight as Alakazam Teleported them miles away where Gengar's putrescence was strongest. Ivy grunted in surprise when they landed in the black, volcanic sand of yet another island and nearly lost her balance. The two Pikachu hopped to the ground and shook themselves out, disoriented but faster to recover than she was. The morning sun was bright overhead and warmed the sand and lazy, lapping waves at Gary's and Ivy's feet. Espeon stretched out and dug its sharp claws into the sand, yawning.

"Ugh, I dunno if I'll ever get used to that," Ivy grumbled.

Gary recovered more quickly, noting the minimal queasiness compared to the last time when he'd Teleported aboard Aerodactyl. "They should be around here somewhere, but I can't pinpoint exactly where—"

A roaring rush of water thundered from a domed cavern on the other side of the small island, where geysers burst through the hardened lava.

"Well, that looks promising," Ivy said, grabbing his hand and making for the misshapen rock cavern. "C'mon!"

Pika and ChuChu bounded ahead of them, and Gary recalled Espeon and Alakazam so he could better keep up. The waterspouts rained tepid spray upon his face as he neared the cavern, though there didn't seem to be a way in. That is, until the geysers died down and something crashed through the rock. Gary and Ivy stopped just short of it, narrowly avoiding the falling chunks of lava rock. The two Pikachu squeaked excitedly at their feet.

"Ash! Lily!" Ivy shouted.

Gary saw nothing through the clearing dust, but he trusted Ivy's keen eyes. Gengar's trademark cackling soon filled the air.

"Hey!" Ash said. "Over here!"

The dust settled and Gary lowered his arm from his eyes, squinting through the bright sunlight. Ash and Snorlax stood at the mouth of the cave-in the huge bear-like Pokémon had just smashed open. Beside him stood Lily, both of them soaking wet, with a smile on her face.

"Oh my god..." Ivy said.

"Sorry if we worried you," Lily said.

A serpentine creature some twenty feet in length and as thick around as a man's waist slithered around her and drew winding lines in the black sand. Sapphire scales gleamed in the morning sunlight, soaking it up and somehow making the world a little brighter. Lily ran a hand along the crest of a wing-like fin at the side of its head, and the Dragonair curled around her. The pearl at its throat pulsed with a silvery sheen, as precious as any sunken treasure.

"Tiny wanted to see his colony again before he evolved," she said, laughing.

Gary could only stare, too awestruck even to reach for the Pokédex. "Tiny," he said, a little breathless. "Right."

Dragonair opened its maw and sang a long, melancholy note that nonetheless filled Gary with a sense of clarity, as uplifting as it was mournful, beauty in sorrow, hope in despair. Ivy jogged toward Ash and Lily with their two Pikachu in tow, and Gary smiled for the first time in a very long time. His eyes were trained on Dragonair, but his thoughts shifted to his grandfather.

Wait'll you see this, Gramps.

He jogged to the group, feet sinking into the soft, volcanic sand with each step, and let his spirits lift as he thought about everything he had to tell his grandfather when they saw him again on Cinnabar.

Ivy shouted something back at him and waved excitedly as he neared.

Wait'll you see you were right about everything.

21. Cinnabar Island, Part 1

Triumvirate, chapter 21: Cinnabar Island, Part 1
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Rosa leaned over the port railing of the freezer trawler and looked back over eighty feet of salt-stained, paint-flecked iron. The barge carried a heavy load of Finneon, Feebas, and Corphish on ice in its hold, brought in from Frost Bay off the coast of Sinnoh far to the north. The sailors were a hardy breed, tough as tree roots from their long months on the water braving sea and storm. Their Pokémon, hefty Machoke and Hariyama, patrolled the deck and carried supplies to and from the hold, where a small group of Spheal and Sealeo maintained the sub-zero temperatures that kept the ship's catch preserved. There were no creature comforts, nothing but a couple spare bedrolls and some space below deck away from the chilly night winds, but Rosa was grateful for woolen blankets and the crew's hospitality, untempered but genuine. There were worse ways to travel.

"You'd probably hate this," she whispered to herself as she gazed over the open sea to the south, though barely a day out from Pallet Town there was no hope of sighting Cinnabar just yet. The breeze was a little too strong to be pleasant, and it was thick with the smells of salt and fish scales and sweat. "Too much water."

She closed her eyes and saw his easy smile in her mind's eye, sincere when he was feeling generous enough to let it slip. It felt like ages since she'd last seen Nate the previous summer. He would be in Nuvema Town now visiting his father for those few precious weeks his mother could bear to part with him, just as it had always been since they were small. A homebody at heart, he'd never had much desire to go anywhere else, do something different. Why leave when there was no need?

The way things were going now, Rosa wished she'd listened to him instead of coming all the way to Kanto on this fool's errand.

"You lean over any more and you'll fall right in."

Rosa whipped around, startled. "Agatha, you should be resting," she hissed, looking over her shoulder to make sure no one was listening. The sailors were busy with their work and didn't pay the two women any mind.

The old crone peered up at Rosa and clutched her woolen blanket tighter around her hunched shoulders. Her hair was bedraggled from fitful sleep, and there were bags under her eyes so deep Rosa was sure she must have been born with them. But Agatha's dark eyes were sharp and alert, and they looked right through her to places unseen. Rosa suppressed a shiver.

"I'm too old to rest. Besides, I always hated sailing. Water's so...fickle."

Agatha's cheeks protruded like she'd been starved for days, and her skin was pulled taut over her bones but pooled in her grooves with nowhere else to go—around her eyes, at the sides of her mouth, the juncture between neck and collarbone. Her drab clothes, worn from struggle and prolonged exposure to sheer cold, hung about her like sheets, shapeless. The flight out of Indigo Plateau had taken its toll on her already ragged body.

"Even so," Rosa protested. "It's in both our interests for you to recover as much as possible before we reach Cinnabar."

Agatha was looking through her like she wasn't even there. She'd been doing that a lot lately. After their mounts flew them safely out of Indigo Plateau's territory, Agatha had struggled to stay aboard Pidgeot. Her wailing ceased, and she passed out on Pidgeot, half awake only to hold on for dear life as the agile Flyer sped south at breakneck speeds. There had been no time to wait, not with Will and Karen around and probably amassing an army of Rangers to shoot them out of the sky. Rosa dared not look back until they reached Pallet Town the next morning. Agatha had said nothing as Rosa helped her down from Pidgeot and recalled the bird. She said nothing when Rosa asked if she could keep going, because if they stopped someone would surely catch them. Do to them what they did to Oak—

"A barge," Agatha had said before Rosa could dwell on that point, her voice raspy and raw from crying and shrieking after so long in the cold, dark, nothing. "To Cinnabar."

The next thing Rosa knew, she'd managed to pay their way onto a freezer trawler just in from Sinnoh by way of Blackthorn in Johto and on its way to Hoenn in the far east, with scheduled stops at Pallet, Cinnabar, and Fuchsia. It was a good plan, she realized as soon as Agatha proposed it. By air, they could only get so far and the Elite Four would be expecting them to prioritize haste over immediate safety and comfort after what had happened in Indigo Plateau. But with Agatha still recovering, both physically and emotionally, flying

was not an option.

Agatha looked north to the churning waters behind them and Pallet's coast, no longer visible in the distance. "So it is," she said. "So it is."

Rosa held her breath. She didn't know Agatha, and from the moment she'd met the woman, all she'd felt from her was a deep-seated chill that had nothing to do with the ice coffin in which Agatha had been confined. There was a hardness in her that even the seasoned sailors working tirelessly around them couldn't hope to grasp after a thousand voyages, and a thousand more after that.

But she'd known Oak, and he'd known Agatha perhaps best of all. She had to try.

"For what it's worth, Oak was best man I've ever known. I'm truly honored to have known him."

Agatha's eyes fell just enough to betray her exhaustion, and suddenly she was an old woman, world-weary and tired and too jaded to waste anymore time feeling sorry for herself. "Yes, he was."

Just then, the dinner bell began to clatter as the trawler's cook called the sailors in for the midday meal. Half the crew set aside their chores to gather below deck in the canteen, where they would wolf down lunch for the next half hour before switching out with their shipmates so the work was never left unattended.

"You should eat something," Rosa said, wincing on instinct at the rebuke she'd come to expect from Agatha whenever she brought up anything remotely resembling concern for the old woman's health.

Agatha grunted. "More sea chum today. Bit cannibalistic when you consider this ship's purpose."

But Agatha hobbled toward the narrow stairwell that led below deck without much further fuss, and Rosa fell into step beside her. She offered the old woman an arm as they descended, but Agatha stubbornly refused and made her way down slowly.

"If I could call out my Ghosts, I'da been down there in a single bound," she groused. "Damn that Lorelei."

The sailors kept away from the two women. Rosa could feel their lecherous eyes on her, scuffed armor or no. The sea was a vast and lonely place, especially for a group of surly men gone so long without

the comfort of a woman's touch. But they left her alone. She liked to think they could sense her power and stayed away out of an innate sense of self-preservation, but Agatha's chilly aura told a different story.

As Rosa pulled out a creaky wooden chair for Agatha at an empty table in the corner and headed for the buffet line to procure them both some food, she wondered how Oak could stand to be around Agatha long enough to have developed what had clearly been a fiercely strong bond with her. Delphi and Imago didn't dwell under the same roof from what she knew, and yet Oak's own grandson had followed a similar path and consorted freely with Imago and Messor. It went against everything Rosa had ever known or understood to be right and true and natural.

But she'd meant what she said to Agatha, she reminded herself. Oak was the best man she'd ever known, not that she'd met many worth remembering. And Nate was still a boy in as many ways as she was still a girl despite their shared twenty-five years. If she'd had a father, she wondered if he would have been anything like Oak.

No, a voice rang loud and clear in her mind, reactionary. *Oak wouldn't abandon his own child.*

There was no way her father, whoever he'd been, could be anything like the noble and kind professor. The only thing they had in common was that they were both lost to her forever.

The line moved, and Rosa waited her turn patiently behind a couple sailors laughing over a bawdy joke. She grabbed a tray from the stack at the edge of the bar line and tried to peer around the burly men to see how the cook had dressed up today's slop.

"I wouldn't get your hopes up. Lunch's been the same thing every day since I got on this trawler."

Rosa cast a glance over her shoulder at the person who'd addressed her. He was not a sailor, to her surprise, but a man a couple years her junior by the youthful look of him. Jet-black hair matched his eyes and the patches of stubble that dusted his sharp, square jaw. Unlike the sailors, he wore high-grade, Brigandine armor, charcoal-grey and scuffed from battle, but he wore no insignia or other identifiable marking. White teeth flashed in a cheeky grin as he caught her scrutinizing him.

"Line's moving," he said with a laugh in his words and a tilt of his

head.

Rosa blinked and nearly dropped her tray as she sidestepped in line to keep the gap from getting any wider. Before she could do anything about it, the cook handed her two bowls filled to the brim with food and made a wet grunting sound. A bit of the fish stew he'd cooked up sloshed on her hand, and she hissed from the heat.

The laughing boy procured two bowls for his own tray and followed her out of line as she paused to suck the hot liquid from the back of her hand. It had a distinctly fishy taste to it, unidentifiable, despite the peppers and garlic and soggy barley the cook had thrown in to give the stew more thickness. But it wasn't altogether terrible.

"It's not that bad," the boy said, pausing beside her. "But after a week or two, you start to wonder if you'll ever want fish again when you get offa this boat."

Rosa turned to face him fully. "Who're you, exactly? And why are you talking to me?"

His smile fell, but he didn't take offense at her brusque tone and merely peered at her curiously. "Oh, right, name's Ethan. I'm not a crew member or anything like that," he said quickly, as though she could have possibly gotten that idea, "I'm just hitchin' a ride to Cinnabar."

"Cinnabar," Rosa repeated. "Why?"

Ethan grinned. "You ask a lotta questions. You know, this stew's not winnin' any awards, but it does hit the spot when you're hungry. Where're you sitting? We'll join you. Then you can fire off your questions to your heart's content."

"Wait, we?"

But Ethan was already walking toward the table in the corner where Agatha was slumped in her blanket, scowling eternally at the craggy wood. When Ethan set down his tray and sloshed a bit of stew, she looked up abruptly and narrowed her eyes.

"Hey!" Rosa almost broke into a jog after him, but some of the stew she carried spilled, and she stopped herself.

"Hey there," Ethan said to Agatha. "I'm Ethan. Nice to meetcha."

Rosa arrived at the table and carefully set down her food. She passed Agatha a bowl and a bent, wooden spoon.

"Hey," she said with a little more force than she'd used before. "Hold it right there."

Ethan spared her a glance, but his attention was soon diverted to someplace behind her and he waved. "Over here."

"Way to pick the dark, creepy corner," a woman's voice said.

Rosa and Agatha both turned to the newcomer, a young woman about Ethan's age in matching, scuffed armor that had seen better days. Her sandy, chestnut hair was tied into pigtails that bobbed just past her shoulders, and her heart-shaped face was taut with annoyance. Light, honey eyes immediately shifted from Rosa to Agatha.

"Ethan," she said.

"Lyra, it's cool, these two're headed to Cinnabar, too," Ethan said.

Lyra let a hand hover over the Pokéballs at her hip, six in total. Rosa set her jaw and quickly took note of the exit. Agatha was still recovering and frail. If Ethan and Lyra tried anything, she would have a tough time of it facing them both in the middle of the ocean. Beartic might be able to do massive damage fast—

"That armor," Agatha spoke up, her voice raspy from disuse. "You're from Johto."

"Yup," Ethan said, smiling.

Agatha narrowed her eyes at him. Even in her enfeeblement, she somehow managed to glare down at Ethan and Lyra in turn over her hooked nose. "The middle of the ocean's a strange place for a Fulmen and an Atlas."

Rosa's mouth hung open in surprise. She grabbed Beartic's Pokéball in a white-knuckled grip. Fulmen on the high seas were the worst opponent to deal with what with the endless supply of water to conduct their already devastating attacks. And Atlas were so tough to kill that it almost wasn't worth the effort. The Normal-type Tamers possessed a resilience even against normally mortal wounds that was beyond the reach of modern science.

The ultimate offense and the ultimate defense, Rosa thought. *No wonder.*

Ethan laid his hands flat on the rickety wooden table and leaned forward toward Agatha. "I could say the same about a member of the Elite Four."

Rosa tore Beartic's Pokéball from her belt, but Lyra discreetly grabbed her wrist in a crushing grip.

"Don't," she hissed. "We'd like to keep this conversation private as much as you do."

Lyra's natural aura wafted off her and hit Rosa like a brick wall. The bulkiest and most resilient Tamer class, Atlas were recognizable on contact. Gym Leader Lenora of Nacrene City back in Unova was a close friend of Juniper's and the only other Atlas Rosa had ever met, but she could never forget the feeling of simply being near one. Her will to fight wavered just knowing how incredibly difficult it was to hurt one, much less kill one.

"Then sit," Agatha said after a few seconds of deliberation. "This stew's even worse cold."

She lifted her spoon with a shaking, wrinkled hand and dunked it into the brownish soup Rosa had set down in front of her. Eyes on her food, she proceeded to ignore the three young people gathered around her. Rosa cast a quick glance behind her, but the sailors all seemed to be absorbed in their own conversation and laughing at each others' jokes to take much notice of their little group. Lyra released her hand, and Rosa clutched Beartic's Pokéball to her middle.

"Thanks," Ethan said brightly, taking a seat across from Agatha.

Lyra sat next to him and Rosa took the seat beside Agatha.

"I'm not who you think I am," Agatha said as she sniffed her stew and curled her lips in disdain.

"Yes, you are," Lyra said. "To Ethan and everyone else here, you're just another old woman. But I know Imago when I see one. I'll never forget that feeling."

"So you didn't actually know who she was," Rosa said, an edge to her tone.

Ethan shrugged. "I'm bad with faces. Good thing Lyra's not."

"If you don't want a scene, you better start talking."

"Actually," Lyra said, "I think *you* better. What's one of the former Elite Four doing absconding to Cinnabar without any Ranger guards, anyway?"

Rosa tried to catch Agatha's eye, but the old crone was staring intently at her stew.

You're on your own, a voice echoed in her mind.

Not that that was anything new.

"You're the ones who approached us," Rosa said carefully. "You first."

Ethan and Lyra exchanged a look, and Ethan smiled. Lyra, however, remained stony-faced and unreadable.

"Okay," Ethan said. "We're headed to Cinnabar to find our frie—"

Lyra grabbed his wrist. "Ethan," she warned.

He hunched over his stew and stirred it with the spoon in his free hand. "It's fine. If they were Team Rocket, they wouldn't be just the two of 'em on a fucking fish boat."

Rosa frowned. "Team Rocket? We're not them, far from it."

"See?"

Lyra eyed Agatha apprehensively. "Gym Leaders, even the Elite Four themselves aren't what they were. Team Rocket's everywhere."

Ethan pulled his hand free and swallowed a big spoonful of stew. "Man, you sound like him now."

"Yeah, well, he'snot here." She set her jaw and stared at the table, lost somewhere far away and sad. "He's not here anymore."

"Who's he?" Rosa asked, now more curious than skeptical.

Lyra fixed her with an icy stare. "Our friend. He was taken captive by Team Rocket, and we've got it on good authority they're converging on Cinnabar."

"And what makes you think you can stand up to the might of Team Rocket?" Agatha said, not looking up. "If they've taken your friend, chances are good he's long dead."

"It's not a matter or can or can't," Ethan said, grave. "And Marco's not dead. Even Team Rocket's boss wouldn't kill his own son and heir."

At this, Agatha looked up. "What did you just say?"

Lyra leaned forward over the table. "We said we're going after Team Rocket. And something tells me a runaway Elite Four and her Sylvan bodyguard aren't stowing away like sea rats to Cinnabar with anything else is mind."

Questions and doubts teemed in Rosa's mind. But Agatha remained silent, and she was on her own again.

"Fine," she said. "I'm listening."

"Good," Lyra said. "Because I think we just might be able to help each other out."

"Dark Pulse!"

Umbreon burst with dark energy just as Alakazam's Psychic attack washed over Ivy. Crobat screeched and swerved through the air at blinding speed, clear of Aerodactyl in the blink of an eye and unscathed. Ivy held Umbreon close and smirked, looking back over her shoulder.

"Get ready," she said over the rushing wind.

Umbreon hissed low in its throat. Faster than her eye could detect, Aerodactyl suddenly disappeared into thin air and left only a zigzagging Psybeam that careened toward Ivy and her mount. She sucked in a breath and pushed Crobat into a dive just as Aerodactyl re-appeared suddenly in front of her and another bolt of Psychic energy headed for her.

"Umbreon!"

The black feline reacted faster than she could scream a command. Curling, black tendrils attacked the amorphous Psychic energy and ate it alive. Crobat ducked into a sharp dive, ever quick of reflex and graceful enough not to send Ivy and Umbreon flying from its back. The sun against the bright, blue sky blinded her momentarily and Ivy squinted. The crackle of a Hyper Beam jetted after her like a rocket, and she pulled up on Crobat's saddle.

"Cross Poison!"

Crobat spun mid-fall in a stunning display of physics-defying agility and sent a deadly blast of razor wind and venom from all four of its wings directly overhead. The noxious wave collided with the Hyper Beam and exploded like fireworks. The crack it made racked her eardrums, and she was sure that any closer and they would have burst.

"Down, Batty!" she shouted over the roar of wind.

Crobat flipped again and crested the breaking waves off the coast of the volcanic atoll where the group had made camp. Mere inches over the water's surface, Ivy took a moment to gaze into the sapphire deep and dunked a hand into the cool waters. Umbreon was fluffed up and agitated as it got sprayed with fine sea foam, but Ivy couldn't fight off the grin at her favorite feline's displeasure at something so insignificant after it had spent the better part of the morning fending off Psychic attacks from Gary's Alakazam without fail.

The black beach was soon upon them and Crobat hovered in midair before touching down gently. Ivy slipped off the saddle with Umbreon and took a moment to unstrap the leather contraption so Crobat could go hunting unencumbered. She scratched it behind the ear and ran her hand along the strap of the black eyepatch that concealed its gouged out eye.

"Nice flying, Batty," she crooned. "Not even Alakazam can touch you."

Crobat quivered awkwardly in the malleable sand, but it leaned into her touch and let its thick tongue loll out the side of its mouth a little. Ivy hefted the saddle under her arm and waved the big bat off to scour the waters for unwitting Magikarp and Remoraid. She made her way closer to the caves where the foursome had set up their temporary camp over the last few days to stow Crobat's saddle. Nearby, Gary circled Aerodactyl to the ground.

It had been four days since Lily found her Dratini-turned-Dragonair, and ever since the foursome had decided to stick around and get in some much-needed training before heading to Cinnabar. Once Ivy set Crobat's saddle in the shade with her pack, she turned back to where Gary was sending Aerodactyl to search for its dinner. The huge, grey reptile took to the skies and eclipsed the entire beach under its broad wingspan. Not for the first time, Ivy thanked her foresight for swiping Aerodactyl's egg way back when. Better to have such a fearsome beast

as an ally than an enemy.

Gary and Alakazam stood at the shoreline, where the waves lapped at their feet and submerged them to mid-calf. He was drenched in sweat, and even Alakazam slumped in exhaustion. They'd been at it all morning since before dawn without rest. It was one thing they could always agree on—Gary rose early and Ivy never slept much, anyway. But the afternoon sun was merciless and sweltering and far too bright for her tastes. Lethargy made her limbs heavy as she trudged toward Gary and recalled Umbreon.

"I almost had you," Gary said in challenge, arms crossed.

Ivy stopped several feet away from him, a safe distance from the water. "You wish. Umbreon blocked everything you threw at us."

He averted his gaze to Alakazam, and the skeletal Pokémon shifted sunken eyes toward Ivy.

"He says it would be different with Miracle Eye."

Ivy looked between Gary and Alakazam, but all she saw was Sabrina with her dead eyes and dead soul and the power to do the impossible.

"That's true."

She remembered Hypno digging its claws into Tyranitar's skull, the scars Tyranitar still bore from the violative assault.

"I'm missing something," Gary went on. "I've got Teleportation down. Even Rocky's pretty used to it now."

Ivy cracked a smile at his inadvertent use of Lily's inane nickname for the ancient Pokémon. Gary didn't seem to notice.

"But Miracle Eye's just..." He ran his hands through his hair and fixed Ivy with a hard stare. "I can't even touch you, no matter what I do."

Her smile curled into a wicked smirk. "Oh, we both know *that's* not true."

He glanced at Alakazam and recalled it to its Pokéball. The water sloshed about his feet as he made his way toward her on the shore, boots sinking into the sand.

"I'm serious," he said, though his gaze fell to her lips.

She showed him her back and crossed her arms, thinking again of Sabrina. "So am I. Sabrina figured it out, so you can, too. You've got her Alakazam, and you beat her at her own game."

"...No, you're the one who beat her."

Ivy's expression soured and she shot him a venomous look over her shoulder. "I'd be dead if it wasn't for you. Stop denying that." Her eyes fell to the Soul Badge that was now proudly pinned to his armor over the left breast, just beneath the Cascade Badge. "That's s'posed to mean something."

Gary remained silent.

"Maybe that's your problem," she went on. "I can't help you if you keep denying what we are. *Both* of us."

His hand on her shoulder spun her around and locked her into place. Blazing green poured over her the way it had that first day in Pallet Town when she'd first laid eyes on him. He was a deluge then as now, washing over her like the waves beating against the black shores underfoot.

He said nothing as he pulled her to him with a force, desperate like he'd never been before. His hands were in her windblown hair, digging into the segmented joints of her armor, while his lips crashed against hers in a bruising kiss. She was on her back before she could come up with an excuse she didn't have or want, and he broke the kiss just to yank off his outer plating and unzip the mesh under armor beneath. Ivy's fingers shook as she mimicked his actions, peeling off clothes as though they were on fire. The sand was coarse under her bare skin and the water was cool and drew goose flesh on her arms and legs.

With all the grace of nervous teenagers blind in the dark, they did what they could to scrape away the barriers between them and search for soft flesh, warm and familiar even after so long. The sand did them no favors. It filled Ivy's nails as she clenched a hand into its pliant softness, but the sea washed the midnight grains away as Gary pulled back, resituated, and washed over her again in time.

Their breathing was labored and uneven, at odds with the lulling rhythm of the sea. Those brilliant, green eyes blazed like the too-hot sun overhead, blinding, and she held him close and left messy kisses along his shoulder, his neck, the stubble growing in along his cheek and jawline, wherever she could reach. Teeth and nails and angles,

nothing fit perfectly but perfect had never been what she wanted. She couldn't stifle her voice any longer, but it was lost to the crashing waves and the endless, blue skies.

He tightened his grip in her hip, raked rough nails over tender flesh, all in a matter of a few blurred, hasty seconds or minutes or hours, she wasn't keeping track. Until the cool, undulating waves were just that, and they took with them the heat of him, the sand under her nails and the sweat on her brow, leaving just the haze of midday.

Pieces of armor lay strewn on the damp sand all around them, half dismantled and carelessly disregarded. Ivy curled her toes as a gentle wave washed over them, and she smiled. A hand ran up her hip and drew her to her side where her face lay mere inches from Gary's.

"Who are you and what've you done with Gary?" she said, breathless.

For a few precious moments, he was just a boy and she was just a girl alone for miles in all directions save for each other.

"How's that for 'moment'?"

She let her palm roam over his bare chest and smirked. "I could get used to it."

There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the breeze was warm and light. She could have fallen asleep on the beach, tangled up with him under the sun with the sea as her lullaby, and she inched closer to him, tempted.

"We're all monsters," he whispered against the top of her head. "I'm not denying it."

Ivy took a deep, languid breath. "Maybe, but not denying something isn't really the same as accepting it."

His breath was warm in her hair, and her eyes began to droop.

"Sabrina accepted it," he said after a moment.

When he didn't elaborate, Ivy bit back a groan and forced herself up on one elbow. "What're you so afraid of? That you'll turn into Sabrina?"

He shifted onto his back and rested the back of his arm over his eyes to shield them from the sun. "Aren't you?"

"No. You'll never be like Sabrina." She leaned down and kissed him, slow and deep with possibilities but in no hurry to explore them. "'Cause you have me," she murmured against his lips.

He wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and pulled her down into another kiss, this one more urgent than the last. She raked her nails lightly over his bicep and broke for air.

His hand tangled in her hair and tugged gently on it. "I wonder if I've been coming at this Miracle Eye thing all wrong." He searched her face for answers, but when he spoke it was more to himself.

Ivy laid her fingers over his lips to silence him. "Moment over clarity. If you think too hard about it, you're never gonna get it."

Sighing, he let his hand fall. "I know."

She rolled off him and stood up to stretch before heading into the water. The shore dropped off almost immediately, and she was soon in deeper water up to her chest. Waves pushed her back toward the sandy shore, and she glanced back at Gary. "So stop thinking for a little longer."

Gary was up and following her into the water in a flash, and she laughed as she threw her arms around him.

Ash leaped twenty feet in the air and rode the aftershock of an explosion that blasted volcanic sand, lava rock, and ocean spray in a ten-foot radius underfoot. Pikachu and Venusaur remained a safe distance on the ground, while Charizard roared in a rage and flew over the blast area, belching black smoke from its maw and nostrils. Gengar's frantic susurrations in his head hit him like a wet towel to the face, suffocating in his momentary lapse in concentration, and for a split second he was back in Lavender Town fighting dead things that couldn't die with a malicious spirit driving him mad. The Ghost's rush of giddy excitement racked his body, and his lips curled in a sinister smile before he could stop himself.

"Fry 'em up!" he barked as he fell through the air.

Charizard roared and spewed a molten column of fire, while Venusaur took advantage of the bright, afternoon sun and let loose a wicked Solar Beam even Erika may have been proud of. Their attacks came from above and below, and they converged in a whorling, superheated shaft of light thicker around than three men shoulder to shoulder with

a single target in sight.

"Whirlpool!" Lily shouted from the water's edge.

She stood with her Pikachu at the bank of a large, landlocked lagoon, amber eyes narrowed as she took off at a sprint and kicked up water with every step. Kingdra reared up from the water's depth and raised the entire lagoon with it in a vicious vortex that defied gravity and slammed into the incoming Solar Beam and Flamethrower attacks. The ensuing explosion knocked Ash back, and only Gengar's Aura broke his fall and tumble over sand and rock. Venusaur's thick vines wrapped around his arms and middle, saving him before he could collide with a misshapen volcanic rock. The blue behemoth growled low in its throat and lumbered toward Ash.

"Thanks, buddy," he said, catching his breath. "But we're not outta the woods yet. Charizard, let 'er have it!"

Charizard swooped around for another attack and began to smoke. Its scales shimmered with mounting heat that radiated off it in visible waves. Fire tongues licked at its flesh and cloaked it in a veil of fire that began to roil and spin around its body and wings. With a roar of challenge, Charizard opened its mouth and unleashed a blast of fire thicker and faster than any Ash had ever seen.

But he had little time to wonder at what power Charizard had tapped into when a flash of azure light shot through the air straight for Charizard.

"Dragon Rush!" Lily shouted.

Dragonair slithered through the air aglow with energy too great to keep inside. The pearls at its throat and tail pulsed and carried it forward and up in defiance of gravity right into the mouth of Charizard's fire.

"Holy shit!"

Dragonair and Charizard collided in a dazzling display of pyrotechnics. Venusaur turned away to shield itself from the heat, and Ash was forced to cover his eyes from the searing shock. The air popped and caught in his throat, too hot to breathe, and he choked on a cough. Pikachu chittered beside him in a frenzy. But just as quickly as it had appeared, the light of the two Dragons' collision faded and something shook the ground next to Ash.

Charizard squatted on all fours just a couple feet from Ash. Drool leaked from between its fangs and sizzled on the sand underfoot. It still pulsed with heat, and Venusaur growled in agitation as it tried to back away from the source.

"Charizard," Ash said, getting to his feet.

The orange lizard was bleeding from an ugly gash in its belly, but its blood boiled to nothing before it could drip to the ground. If it was in pain, it didn't let on. Ash pulled out his Pokédex and scanned Charizard.

"Blast Burn? Whoa! That's, like, a *really* powerful attack," he said as he skimmed the information that popped up. "No wonder you stood up to that crazy Dragon Rush." He snapped the Pokédex closed and grinned up at Charizard. "Show off."

Gengar emerged from Ash's shoulders and materialized on the ground, but it hopped away from Charizard and shook out its gaseous hands as though burned. Charizard's heat dissipated in a matter of seconds, and Pikachu scampered up onto its back to give it a good sniff.

"Ash! Are you okay?"

Lily had an arm around Dragonair's neck as the lithe serpent slithered toward him faster than she could run on her own. Kingdra lingered at the water's edge just a couple yards back. Her Pikachu jumped down off her shoulder and immediately scuttled toward Charizard, squeaking.

"Hey, yeah, everything's cool," Ash said, waving. "Looks like Charizard learned Blast Burn. Pretty awesome, huh?"

"Wow." Lily let go of Dragonair and wandered up to Charizard, fearless. "That *is* awesome!" She reached for Charizard, and the pseudo-Dragon lowered its muzzle to allow the contact. "Oh no, he's hurt. Hold on, I brought a Super Potion just in case."

Ash just stared as she pulled out the medicine from a small bag strapped to her thigh and pushed at Charizard's neck to get it to stand up on its hind legs for easier access.

"You know, I've seen you boss Charizard around a bunch now, but I still can't get used to it. He'da snarled at me for sure by now if it was me doin' that instead of you."

Lily sprayed the Super Potion over Charizard's belly to speed along the healing process. "Hm? Oh, he's just a big softy. Right, Charizard?"

Charizard puffed a small mushroom cloud of black smoke from its nostrils but made no indication of discomfort as Lily finished treating it. Ash's Pikachu squeaked happily atop its neck.

"Hah, right. If you say so."

Dragonair slithered around and peered first at Venusaur, then at Ash and Gengar. Its natural curiosity seemed only to grow stronger with each passing day, and Ash smiled a little. In the grand scheme of things, it was still a young Pokémon that had probably never even seen humans before.

"Still, you and your Dragons're making a lotta progress," Ash said. "Scaly's one thing, but even Tiny seems to trust you now."

Lily ran a hand down Dragonair's smooth neck. "You think so? I hope it'll be enough to help you guys out when we get to Cinnabar."

"'Course it will! You're way tougher than you think, trust me. I got the bruises to prove it."

He recalled Venusaur and sent Charizard off to find a well-deserved meal, which the orange lizard was more than happy to see to. Kingdra and Dragonair disappeared into the lagoon, presumably in search of food, as well, leaving Ash and Lily alone on the small island with their two Pikachu who were too busy playing by the water to pay them any mind.

"You're not just saying that, right?" Lily said as they peeled off their armor to relax in their regular clothes and dip their bare feet in the water. "My whole life I've been a scientist. And I love it, but I'm not really a fighter or anything."

"Me neither, but you learn things about yourself when you got no other choice. Surge taught me that."

Gengar had taken to rolling around in the sand, but try as it might the sand wouldn't mold to its shadowy claws.

Lily blushed and bit back a smile. Her bangs, damp from their battle, were plastered to her forehead and hid her eyes. Without thinking, Ash brushed them aside and tried not to laugh at how red her face was. He opened his mouth to tease her about it, but before he could

get a word out, she leaned forward and kissed him.

Ash gasped—*gasped*, of all the ridiculous things, she'd caught him so off-guard—but she pulled away before his brain caught up to what was going on. She looked up at him, wide-eyed and still a little flushed, waiting for him to stop being a fucking tool and say something.

"U-Uh, I mean," he stammered.

Lily's blush returned full-force and she hastily looked away. "Oh god, I'm sorry. You totally weren't, I mean, I read it wrong and you're so thinking I'm a loser right now. Ugh, stupid, so stupid!"

She buried her face in her hands and tried to shrink in on herself. Ash didn't interrupt her self-flagellating tirade, but his brain decided to resume working once she was done and he snapped his gaping mouth shut. He put a hand on her shoulder, and she jumped and peeked at him through her fingers.

"Um," he began. "Hey, you're not stupid. That wasn't stupid, I mean." He gave her an easy smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Hey, come outta there, will you?"

Lily dropped her hands and forced herself to look up at him. They sat partially in the shade under a rock outcropping that overlooked the lagoon, and this close he could count the many freckles on her cheeks and nose brought out by their time in the sun.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I just thought..." She swallowed. "I thought you liked me. Was I wrong?"

He blinked and turned away to look into the deep, blue water that dropped off into an undersea tunnel where Kingdra and Dragonair had disappeared. "Yeah. I mean, no, but it's..." He rubbed his mouth. "Ew, I don't wanna say it's complicated, that's so lame."

"Is it Misty? I, well... I thought you guys broke up?" She sucked in a sharp breath and covered her cheeks in horror. "Oh no, it hasn't been that long, has it? Ugh, I really *was* stupid. Ash, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to push you or anything. I-I've never pushed anyone in my life, really! Oh my god."

He faced her again and couldn't help but smile a little. "It's okay, really, it's not you—" *It's me.*

As soon as he had the thought, he hated it. He sounded like an angsty teen romance movie, the kind Gary's sister had always roped Gary and him into watching when they were little and she was big enough to hog the remote from them.

What the hell am I doing?

He didn't realize he'd voiced that last thought until Lily got up abruptly and dove into the lagoon. She splashed him a little with her dive and came up for air a few seconds later. Her blonde hair was a shade darker wet and she wiped the water from her eyes. Her expression was guarded, unreadable as she floated in the middle of the lagoon and looked back at him.

"I *am* sorry," she said again. "I just thought you liked me from the way you've been treating me. Ever since you jumped out of Silph Tower after me, I guess I always kinda had that idea."

He got up, suddenly too restless to remain sitting. "Lily, that's not—"

"No, it's okay, I get it. I shouldn't have assumed. A scientist should never assume," she said more to herself than to him. "It was my fault."

Ash trudged after her into the water but stopped when it reached his waist just a few feet short of where she treaded water.

"Stop apologizing. It's not something you should apologize for." He looked up toward the sky and wished for Gary's steady strength. He would know what to do. He always knew what to do. "How do I say this?"

"...You could just say it."

Lily watched him up to her chin in the water, and for reasons he couldn't explain, he felt naked when she looked at him like that. Peeled away to the core, and no amount of smiles and teasing could cover him up. A wave of exhaustion made him slump. The last time he'd felt like this was the last time he'd seen Misty and ended it for good.

He sank into the water and leaned back on his hands, submerged to the elbow. "I do like you. A lot. I didn't expect it so soon after Misty, but... I dunno, I can't help it. I like that you get along with Gengar. That's like, well, no one but me gets along with Gengar, you know. And I like how I'm just lighter around you. Before you came, I felt like I had to keep us going. I still kinda feel that way. Gary and Ivy're

great, but they get weighed down. It can be depressing when they're at their worst, you've seen it. But it's not like that with you. I just feel," he searched for a way to make her understand. "Lighter. I can't explain it."

Lily said nothing, so he continued.

"But I'm the one who should apologize. Misty and me, I didn't treat her like I shoulda. I think it just wasn't meant to be in the end, and that really sucks. There's nothin' I coulda done, and there's nothin' I can do about it now. I'm okay with that now," he added quickly, not wanting to give her the wrong idea. "But I think she was right about me. Maybe there's never gonna be a last battle, and then I can go home and just *live*. You know? I dunno if I *want* there to be a last battle." He clenched his fists in the black sand underwater. "My mom's still in a coma after what happened in Pallet Town, no thanks to Team Rocket. I can't just stop. I can't let that happen again. Maybe it's not enough for me to settle down somewhere, go back to the life I had before all this. Not after everything that's happened. But that's not what Misty wanted, and it's not something I think anybody wants. Dunno why they would, really."

He shook his head. "Sorry, I'm rambling."

Lily swam to the shallower water and walked out, dripping. She looked down on him. "You have no idea what I want, so don't assume you do."

"Lily..."

She smiled brightly for him, and that feeling of weightlessness she brought out of him fluttered in his chest.

"But you know? You don't have to do all that by yourself. That's what me and Gary and Ivy are here for. It's why I came out here with you guys."

He swallowed the lump in his throat, afraid he might actually lift out of the water and float away if she kept looking at him like that.

"I won't bring it up again, okay? You still have some stuff to figure out."

She started to get out of the lagoon, but he caught her wrist.

"Wait," he said, his breath catching in his throat. "Just gimme a little

time. I know it's not fair, but if you can wait a little..."

She nodded after a moment's hesitation. "Of course. But, um, maybe don't wait too long? I'm a little nervous about what's waiting on Cinnabar, you know..." She laughed nervously. "Feels like I'm falling toward something. Weird, right?"

"Hey Ash! Lily!"

Gary and Ivy circled the little islet aboard Aerodactyl and aimed to touch down on the sand.

"Hey, guys!" Lily waved to them. "C'mon, Ash."

Ash had no choice but to get out of the water just as Aerodactyl landed.

"Hey, so I was thinking you could train with me while Gary works on his Miracle Eye thing," Ivy said to Lily. "What do you say?"

"Sure!"

"Great, 'cause I want Tyranitar to get some experience fighting Dragons and stuff."

Ash joined the group after a moment's hesitation and plastered his trademark grin on his face. "How 'bout some lunch first?"

"All you ever think about is food," Gary grumbled.

Ivy elbowed him playfully. "Says the guy whose stomach grumbled the whole flight here."

Gary scowled and crossed his arms. "Pesky woman."

Ash didn't miss the way Ivy smiled just then.

"Yeah, yeah," she said.

They divided into pairs, with Ash and Ivy working on the fire while Lily and Gary went to scour the waters for some unwitting Magikarp or Krabby. With Charizard still out hunting, it was left to Houndoom to light the kindling and branches Ash and Ivy gathered up.

"So, you and Gary're back to normal?" he ventured.

"Hah, normal, right." Ivy smiled to herself as she patted Houndoom.

"It's more like we're past it."

"Well, that's a good thing, right?"

"Definitely. You know, you were right about him. I think... I think he just needed time to come to terms with things. But I'm glad Lily talked to him. I dunno if I coulda gone on like we were in Fuchsia for much longer."

"Lily did? What'd she say to him?"

Ivy shrugged and stuck a couple roasting sticks in the sand to act as makeshift spits. "He said she reminded him that we're in this together. She's like that, you know. Lily." Ivy hugged her knees to her chest. Blue eyes as deep as the lagoon nearby trained on Ash, thoughtful. "She listens, and you just feel, I dunno, lighter somehow. Like the weight of the world isn't so hard to carry when she's around."

Nearby, Gary yelped when Dodrio's three heads lost hold of a fat Magikarp in their squabbling and it slapped him in the face with its tail before diving back into the water.

"Ow! What the fuck!"

Lily burst out laughing. "Magikarp used Splash! It's *super* effective!"

"Shut up!"

"Hey, you're not gonna faint, are you?"

Ivy got up. "Are you guys done yet? I'm starving!"

"You're *always* starving," Gary grumbled.

Ash didn't get up to join them, content just to watch. Gengar waddled up to him, exhausted from its attempts to create a sand castle without actually being able to manipulate the sand. It sprawled out on the sand next to him and frowned dramatically. Pikachu broke from its game of chase with Lily's Pikachu and clambered up onto Ash's head, where it squeaked down at him.

"I know, buddy," he said, resting his hands behind him on the sand and staring into the fire Houndoom had started. "I guess we don't really have all that much time."

Ivy and Lily were laughing about something, mostly likely at Gary's expense given his surly expression and incoherent grumbling. Dodrio

had managed to snatch up two Magikarp and a Krabby, and Lily was trying to tell it not to eat them.

"But lemme pretend we do for a little longer." Ash reached up and scratched Pikachu behind the ears.

Lily's Pikachu peered up at him with big, dark eyes, and after a moment's hesitation, Ash reached out and petted it, too.

It took the group another two days to reach the western reaches of the vast Seafoam Islands and sight the ruddy red face of Mt. Cinnabar, the volcano that gave the island its name. It reached for the cloudless, blue sky like a bloody knife impaled through the earth. Below, the docks gave way to red beaches, shimmering like raw, exposed muscle beneath the shallow waters.

They had used their time well, Lily reflected. She and Dragonair had had ample time to get used to each other, Wigglytuff got the hang of its new Fairy-type attack, and Gary was tireless in his efforts to unlock the secrets of Sabrina's Miracle Eye, though so far with minimal success. But they could wait no longer.

As Aerodactyl drew closer to the island nation she called home, Lily's stomach began to flutter at the thought of returning. It was the same island she'd left behind, but she was different, changed. A Titan, fully realized, and part of a team of misfit trainers with dreams of war and winning.

"We're coming up on Cinnabar!" Gary shouted over the rushing winds.

Lily leaned forward and put a hand on his shoulder. "The Gym's in the volcano! We can land at the eastern base, and I should be able to get us inside!"

Ivy and Ash followed them on Crobat and Charizard, respectively, into Cinnabar's airspace. Charizard let out a mighty roar, and Lily wondered if it was reacting to the volcano's dormant power. Fire types were trained in abundance on Cinnabar, and knowing what she knew now, she wondered if Blaine was a Tamer with an affinity for Fire types.

Before she could ask Gary about it, Aerodactyl swooped down toward the base of the volcano. Shouts rang out below, and a couple bright flashes indicated Pokémon being released. Armed military men and women ran to surround the foursome and their Pokémon, flanked by

Ponyta and Growlithe. No one dismounted.

"You! Dismount now and get on the ground or we open fire!" one of the uniformed military officers barked.

Ivy and Ash went for their Pokéballs and Charizard began to snarl menacingly, but Lily slipped off Aerodactyl and put her hands up.

"Wait, please," she said. "I'm Cinnabarean, Lily Kida. I work in the Labs under Blaine, please hold your fire."

"What is that thing?"

"I think it's an Aerodactyl!"

"You gotta be kidding, that thing's a monster! Gotta be at least thirty, forty feet across!"

The whispers from the cadets reached her ears, but the commanding officer who'd spoken first stepped forward. He had a hand on the longsword sheathed at his hip, and his Rapidash clopped along beside him, radiating heat.

"You're in direct violation of Code Delta-four oh eight bringing unregistered Flyers into Cinnabar airspace. If the General hadn't called a temporary ceasefire, we woulda shot you down outta the sky."

"Ceasefire?" Lily said, shocked.

Since when is Cinnabar in lockdown?

Gary slipped off Aerodactyl's back and slowly drew up to her side so the soldiers could see him moving. Ivy and Ash remained mounted.

"We're here with peaceful intentions," he said. "I'm Gary Oak, my grandfather's Professor Samuel Oak. We just came for an audience with Gym Leader Blaine."

Pikachu squeaked on Lily's shoulder, agitated, but she dared not make any moves that could be misinterpreted as hostile.

The commanding officer, a tanned, muscled man in fatigues and a visor to keep the scorching sun out of his face narrowed dark eyes at her. He drummed his fingers on his longsword's hilt, itching for a cigarette. Aerodactyl whipped its thick tail around to settle between Gary and the strangers, and he hissed in surprise. The ancient reptile curled back its upper lip to reveal yellowed, sharp teeth and growled

in warning.

"Get that thing under control!" he said, drawing his sword.

Aerodactyl narrowed its beady eyes and shifted to face the commander fully. Gary put up his hand to calm it.

"I'm gonna reach for my ID," Lily announced. "Everything we've told you is true."

Slowly, she reached into the pouch at her hip and rummaged about for her lab ID card. When she found it, she held it out to the commanding officer. When he got close enough, she read the name sewn into his uniform—Carvalho. His silver dog tags clinked softly as he accepted her ID card.

"Paleogeneticist," he read. "You raise Pokémon from the dead or something?"

She couldn't help the small swell of pride and nodded toward Aerodactyl. "Or something."

Carvalho said nothing as he took a moment to assess Aerodactyl, then his gaze fell back to Gary. "I've heard of Professor Oak, but I've never heard of you. Here on the Island, you're only as good as your own damn self. You'd do well to remember that, boy."

Ivy and Ash still hadn't budged, but now Ash was getting weird looks as the other officers began to notice the ominous shadow that haunted him.

"Commander," Lily said. "We need an audience with Gym Leader Blaine, it's urgent. I can vouch for my companions, and they'd be happy to dismount and recall their Pokémon in a show of good faith."

She cast Ivy a glance askance with as much confidence as she could project, but Ivy just stared at her blankly. Luckily, Gary came to her rescue and recalled Aerodactyl.

"Ash, Ivy," he said, his eyes never leaving Carvalho.

Ash patted Charizard and dismounted, and Charizard bared its teeth at the nearest Growlithe like it was nothing more than the orange lizard's next meal. He recalled Charizard before it could go on a rampage and blow this for everyone on account of ego. Ivy stared down Carvalho, and he held her glare with equal venom.

"Ivy," Gary said again. "Please."

She graced everyone with a cloyingly sweet smile and swung down from Crobat, who twitched as it eyed Carvalho's burning Rapidash. "Nice flying, Batty," she whispered and recalled the hairy bat.

"That one, too," one of Carvalho's men said, pointing to Ash.

Never one to shun the spotlight, Gengar rose up from Ash's shoulders in a putrid, black cloud and narrowed lurid eyes at the military officers. Disembodied cackling permeated the area, and the officers went for their blades and bows. Growlithe whimpered and hid behind its trainer's legs, while Carvalho's Rapidash stamped the ground, fretful.

"Sorry," Ash said with an easy smile that made Lily's skin crawl—less to unnerve and more to amuse himself. "Ghosts like to hang out."

Carvalho raised his sword at Lily, and the sharpened tip rested mere inches from her nose. "I don't care who you are. I see no reason to give you an audience with the General after the stunt you pulled getting here."

"A ceasefire means you were either fighting or on the verge of fighting earlier," Gary said. "Why?"

Carvalho peered at Gary down his hooked nose. "I guess you're not as stupid as you look. But unfortunately for you, I'm not at liberty to divulge that information."

"I can think of a few ways to make you wanna divulge a *lot* of things," Ivy said. Her hands rested casually on a pair of throwing knives tucked securely at her hips, two of the many she carried on her person.

Before Carvalho could respond to the thinly-veiled threat, Lily said, "Commander, please listen to me. We're here because we need Blaine's help in fighting Team Rocket. We just came from Fuchsia right after we fought in the Siege of Saffron against Team Rocket."

Carvalho lowered his sword. "Oh, really? Got any proof?"

Ivy tossed something at Carvalho without warning, but he caught it without even looking.

"Proof that we started it? Or proof that Sabrina's dead? Take your

pick."

The Marsh Badge glistened in the sunlight in Carvalho's gloved palm, and he stared down at it for a couple seconds. Gary held out the Cascade Badge and the Soul Badge.

"We've been to almost every Gym in Kanto," he explained. "And we either earned the Gym Leaders' buy in, or we got rid of them if they were with Team Rocket. Cinnabar's our last stop."

Ash held out his Thunder Badge and Rainbow Badge to help prove Gary's point, and Carvalho studied the group, ever silent.

"We think Team Rocket can be stopped for good, but we need to talk to Blaine," Lily implored the commander.

Carvalho threw the Marsh Badge back to Ivy, and she caught it with a smile.

"You're either totally delusional, or you're some kinda mind readers," he said. "Those Rockets beat you here."

"*What*?" Ash blurted out. "What's that s'posed to mean? Team Rocket's here?"

Carvalho waved off his men, and they seemed grateful to back away from Gengar. "An envoy and an ultimatum, from the looks of it. But I've said too much already. You want an audience? Fine, not like Blaine's one to turn away his own people." His gaze lingered on Lily. "I'm sure you won't mind me and my men escorting you."

They had no choice, but Lily allowed herself a small sigh of relief. At least they would get to talk to Blaine. Carvalho signaled his men and marched past the group, while the more junior officers and their Pokémon lingered behind to herd the foursome toward the volcano. Lily fell into step next to Ivy.

"If that's how they treat their own, I'd just *love* to see how they greeted Team Rocket," she snickered.

"I just hope Team Rocket hasn't convinced Blaine to see things their way or something." Lily bit her lip, nervous.

Carvalho led them into the side of the volcano through open, metal doors two stories high. Heat radiated from the walls, but once they were past the entrance the interior was tiled and air conditioned. They

went deeper into the volcano, and Lily found herself wondering if at any moment the floors would melt underfoot and burst with bubbling magma, roasting them alive. But with each step she took, nothing happened and Carvalho seemed perfectly at ease. His Rapidash clopped along beside him, a beast of a horse twenty hands tall. Its blazing tail crackled with each careless swish behind it, but the fire radiated no heat and Carvalho didn't flinch when it brushed him.

Science is so cool, Lily thought to herself as she marveled at Rapidash's ability to regulate its fire temperature at will.

Carvalho led them through several rooms, including a sitting lounge and a small gymnasium where a few people were busy lifting weights and running on treadmills. But mostly they passed by closed, locked doors that concealed who knew what. The place had a hospital feel to it. Obliviating, obliterating white walls, no windows, and the smell of death, though Lily wanted to think she imagined the latter.

"Here we are." Carvalho stopped at one of the doors in the corridor, plain and no different from any of the others.

"Here?" Ash said.

"You didn't think Blaine would announce his holdfast with a sign or lavish decor, did you?"

Ash nudged Lily and whispered, "Blaine seems paranoid, you know?"

"When you've got the kinda record he has at his age, there's a lotta people who'd want you dead," she whispered back.

Carvalho opened the door, and as soon as Lily stepped inside an asphyxiating heat assaulted her bodily. The walls were raw stone hollowed out by lava and sharp claws. The floor shifted, and Ash swore under his breath.

"Oh my god," Ivy said.

The floor was not a floor at all, but a metal platform bolted to the wall and suspended on thick, iron chains that pierced the rock far above. Lily looked up and saw blue skies, but about a hundred feet below, magma bubbled and glowed.

"Watch your step," Carvalho said coldly.

The precarious bridge led to a vast, suspended arena in the middle of

the volcano's mouth where a small group of people were gathered. The soldiers that had escorted the foursome stood guard at the door. There was no other way out.

Pikachu squeaked in distress on Lily's shoulder, and she patted it reassuringly. "It's okay, ChuChu, just stay close."

In truth, it was far from okay. The temperatures bubbling up from the turgid lava below were making her sweat profusely. The others were equally suffering in their armor, but Carvalho either didn't notice or had the fortitude to ignore the sweltering heat. Ivy peered over the edge to the magma below, expression hard.

"Wonder how many people have fallen down there?" she said.

"More than you'd care to know, little lady," Carvalho said.

Ivy fixed the back of his head with a venomous stare. "Didn't realize that was one of Cinnabar's shining accomplishments."

"Out with you! I said out!" someone shouted up ahead.

Voices drifted to them, but Lily had a hard time making them out. The man who'd shouted raised his voice again.

"Out, or I'll *throw* you out!"

Of the group of people gathered in the arena, a pair of them hastily backed away toward the entrance. Ivy grabbed Gary's hand and turned her head away just as they passed, but Lily peeked up at them. Two men in nondescript black, nothing amiss except for the red 'R' stitched into the left breast of each of their uniforms. Lily bit her tongue and turned her head away, suddenly chilled to the bone.

They beat us here?

A hand in hers forced it to stop shaking, and she looked up at Ash.

"Don't worry," he whispered, eyes narrowed at the people remaining in the arena. "There's no way Team Rocket coulda won Blaine over. You said so yourself."

I did say that, she remembered. Team Rocket had never had a presence in Cinnabar because Blaine and his Fire Brigades kept a tight perimeter. The fluttering in her stomach quelled a little, and Ash squeezed her hand. His grip was firm and steady despite the heat and

the situation, and she drew strength from the contact.

"Yeah," she said. "You're right."

When they approached the middle of the arena, she let go of his hand and held her head up high. Blaine was technically her boss at the Labs, but she'd only ever seen him in passing. The man was always busy with the Fire Brigades or in his private lab in the volcano. He cut her and the other scientists' paychecks and approved whatever projects they wanted to pursue, but other than that the man was a stranger to her. How could she convince a stranger to take up arms for a cause that was so far removed from the island nation?

Three men and a woman were gathered around a table. One of the men remained standing. He wore a white lab coat and a wide-brimmed hat to shade his eyes from the shaft of sunlight that filtered in through the mouth of the volcano overhead. He was cleanshaven and wore round sunglasses, but the wrinkles around his mouth and neck belied his advanced age. The other two men, both older, and the woman, a buxom redhead of some thirty years decked in armor and an array of war medals, all sat at the wooden table and didn't bother getting up. Carvalho paid them no mind and addressed the man in the hat.

"Sir, these four have requested an audience with you. They claim it's an emergency."

The man, presumably Blaine, regarded Lily and the others from behind his rimless, round sunglasses such that it was impossible to see his eyes or glean his thoughts. His mouth twitched. "More Rocket Agents? Commander, I *hate* redundancy."

"We're not with Team Rocket," Gary said, stepping forward. "We came to put a stop to them."

"Oh-ho! Did you, now?" Blaine walked around the edge of the table to stand face to face with Gary. "And what do a buncha kids think they can do to stop Team Rocket?"

Gary indicated the Soul Badge and Cascade Badge pinned to his armor. Ash and Ivy were quick to follow his example. "We can be very persuasive."

Blaine said nothing as he examined the glittering Badges they'd collected.

"They claim they're responsible for spearheading the Siege of Saffron, sir," Carvalho said. "And this one's one of ours." He gestured to Lily.

"You *don't* say." Blaine focused his attention on Lily. "And you are?"

Lily took a calming breath and stood up to her full five feet of height. "Lily Kida, sir. I'm a paleogeneticist in the Cinnabar Labs."

"Kida? I've heard of you before. There was a report that you'd gone missing during a research trip to Fuchsia."

Lily nodded. "It was a ploy set up by Team Rocket. They held me hostage at Silph in Saffron. Then the Siege happened, and that's how I got free."

Blaine cast a glance at his table mates. "Silph? What did they have you doing there?"

Lily held back a wince. "Well, sir, they wanted me to help with a project. They wanted to reconstruct an artifact, the Silver Wing. Supposedly, it was to lure the ancient Pokémon Lugia out from hiding. I... I'm ashamed to say the project was a success, and now Team Rocket has the Silver Wing."

One of the seated men chuckled. "Young lady, you believe these tall tales of ancient Pokémon and legends lost to the deep blue sea?"

"Of course," Lily said without hesitation. "It's what I do here in the Labs. When you work with ancient Pokémon, you figure out pretty quick that nothing's ever really gone."

The woman smiled. "Blaine, didn't you say one of your scientists figured out how to revive ancient Pokémon?"

"Did I? Bah, my years're showing!" Blaine shrugged and once more turned to the group. "But I still don't see how any of this is going to help you or anyone else 'stop' Team Rocket, as you say. From what I can tell, you're back safe and sound, and their operations on the mainland have taken a nasty hit."

Ivy stepped forward then. "That's not the *point*. Listen, I used to work for Team Rocket and I've seen what they're capable of. Ever since I got to Kanto, I've heard from every corner of this continent what a hero you were in the Great War. If you're really the golden boy people think you are, you'll deal the final blow to Team Rocket before they have time to regroup."

Blaine put up his hands in mock alarm. "Oh, *goodness*, you're impatient. Wanting me to start a war just because you say so?" Blaine clasped his hands behind his back. "Presumptuous doesn't even begin to cover it."

"It's not presumptuous," Gary said. "It's the truth. If you've been following what's happened on the mainland at all, then you know about the municipal crises that bled Viridian and Pewter dry. You know how Fuchsia was a puppet state, and how Saffron held everyone hostage with its trade boycotts. You must know how Team Rocket usurped control of Silph right under everyone's noses."

"Even if I know these things, I still don't see how Cinnabar's magically acquired responsibility to make everyone whole. As you can see, I run a one-island operation here. The mainland has nothing to offer me that I can't acquire for myself. Why should I fight their wars for them? I've done enough of that in my lifetime."

"Because it's our fight, too," Lily said. "That was Team Rocket in here just a minute ago, right?"

"Did they try to recruit you to their side?" Gary asked.

Blaine tapped his chin. "Team Rocket, the mainland, Johto, it's all the same to me."

"You seemed pretty eager to kick them out," Ivy sneered. "What's the matter? Chimera too cutting edge science for you?"

The woman laughed. "Blaine, show these young people out. I have drills to get back to, and this is clearly a waste of time."

"You're making a huge mistake," Lily said. "Please, Blaine, you have to hear me. Team Rocket's already here. They lost their hold on the mainland, and this is their last shot at recouping their losses. I know it's not your fight, but it wasn't mine either until they made it my fight. Please, if you wait too long, they'll definitely win!"

Blaine sighed. "I'm an old man, weary of fighting. I wonder, is it too much to ask to be left in peace after everything I've done for this accursed continent?"

Ash, who'd remained silent until now, sidestepped Lily and approached the table. "Wait a minute, something's weird here."

Carvalho reached out to grab him. "Not another step closer—ack!"

Gengar bubbled up from Ash's shoulders and cloaked him in a sinister Aura that startled Carvalho and stayed his hand. Ash's red eyes bled an eerie violet as his sight merged with Gengar's and he surveyed the four people in front of him.

"Agatha said all the Gym Leaders're Tamers, but that guy's not one of them." Ash indicated Blaine.

"He's not?" Ivy said.

"No, but she is."

The woman eyed Ash with no trace of her previous derisive humor, but she said nothing.

"But the Gym Leader here's s'posed to be a guy, which means..." Ash shifted his gaze to the seated man who hadn't spoken a word at all since their group had arrived. "*You're* the real Blaine."

The man Ash had singled out was wholly unimpressive next to his companions. He wore a brown jacket two sizes too big for him and a matching bucket hat that shaded his eyes and bald head. A long, white mustache, perfectly clipped and maintained, concealed his mouth. He looked up and caught Ash's gaze, and suddenly Lily remembered the heat of this place. His flinty eyes burned, a truly searing gaze that could have eaten through stone and steel. Lily would have believed it if he'd claimed it to be so.

"Imago," he said quietly, though she heard him clear as day.

She had a sudden image of Steven Stone, half draped in shadows when he revealed himself for the first time in their shared cell at Silph. She could have gone on worrying internally for who knew how long unless he'd chosen to make his presence known then. She'd hardly noticed the real Blaine coming in here, so distracted by the situation at hand and the pomp of his double.

"And you're Ignifer, right?" Ash said. "And you, too."

"Ignifera," the woman snapped. "There's a difference."

"Sir," Carvalho said.

Blaine put up a hand, but his eyes remained trained on Ash. "It's fine, Commander. Please escort Lorence back to his quarters. I won't be needing a double any longer today."

Lorence removed his hat and sunglasses and smiled at the foursome. "A pleasure to meet you all."

Carvalho didn't utter any complaints, but he cast a lingering glance back at Lily before following Lorence back to the entrance. Alone with the real Blaine and his associates, Lily imagined the heat had somehow skyrocketed. She wished she had some water to ease the sting in her throat.

Blaine remained seated. "I'm sure I don't need to explain the need for caution. There are...quite a number of people in this world who would rejoice over my death."

"You didn't recognize him?" Ivy asked discreetly.

"No," Lily said, incredulous. "Not at all."

He heard their whispering and fixed his smoldering gaze on Lily. "Miss Kida, unlike Lorence, I am *very* familiar with your work in my Labs, though this is the first time we're meeting face to face. I have my own sources that brought word to me of the so-called Silver Wing, and your further testimony leaves no room for doubt at this point in time. I do believe Team Rocket successfully recreated the artifact, but it's no longer in their possession."

"What? How do you know that? Um, with all due respect."

Blaine didn't blink. She was pretty sure he hadn't blinked even once since they got here.

"*The more time you spend surrounded by monsters, the closer you drift toward them."* Steven's voice echoed in her head, and she repressed a shiver.

"Because they were commissioned to recreate it by someone far above them."

"Excuse me, Blaine? Yeah, hi," Ivy said. "No offense, but that's sort of tomorrow's problem at the moment. Team Rocket's already here, and we need to do something about them first."

"You must be the Reaper," Blaine said. "Kill first, ask questions later."

Faster than the eye could see, Ivy threw a knife that embedded itself in the back of Blaine's chair just above his shoulder. He still didn't blink.

"That's the only language Team Rocket understands, trust me," she said darkly.

The curvaceous woman got up out of her chair and glared daggers at Ivy. "Insolent girl. How *dare* you threaten him?"

"That's enough, Marla," Blaine said, not even bothering to raise his voice. "I'm not finished speaking with our guests."

Marla had a hand flat on the wooden table, and it began to smoke between her fingers. She had the same, flinty eyes as Blaine, but they were explosive with heat and emotion where his were calm as still waters hiding horrors beyond imagination. She blinked, and once more the mask of control was back in place, the turbulent emotions hidden away. She fisted her hand and the smoke dissipated, but the table now bore a scorch mark roughly in the shape of a human hand.

"Apologies, Grandfather." Marla sat back down, and her many military medals clinked pleasantly against each other.

"Ivy's right," Gary said. "We've been fighting Team Rocket for a long time now, and there's no reasoning with them. The only option is to remove them from the equation, starting at the top. That's why we came here asking for your help, to go after their leaders. Take off the head, and the Grunts'll scatter."

Blaine gave absolutely no physical reaction to Gary's words, and Lily wondered if the man even knew how to move his face to express emotion.

"Gary Oak, I presume. You're the spitting image of your grandfather in his youth. I see you've inherited his Clairvoyance too, and yet you lack wisdom in your youth and inexperience."

Ivy went for another knife, but Gary grabbed her arm in warning. Blaine watched their interaction carefully.

"Interesting. Imago, Messor, and Delphi..."

"Sir, do you think they're the ones she told us about?" the man to Blaine's left said.

He was an older man in plain clothes, but where Blaine was sharp and smoldering, this man was round and sweating from the heat as much as Lily was. Only Blaine and Marla seemed perfectly at ease suspended over boiling magma.

"It's not for me to say, though I don't believe in coincidences," Blaine said. "Miss Kida, perhaps you can explain to young Oak here why an assault directly on Team Rocket would not accomplish his end goal of ridding the continent of their infectious presence."

Lily's mouth went dry, and the only words she could think of were ones she'd probably only ever gurgled as an inarticulate child. She wiped the sweat from her brow.

"Um, well..."

She looked between Blaine and Marla and the volcano's walls, which she was pretty sure looked a lot closer than they had before as they shimmered with heat. Ash was next to her, still emitting an eerie glow from Gengar's Aura, the same way he'd looked when she was falling to her death from Silph Tower.

Frowning, she had a thought. "Well, I'd imagine that Team Rocket's got a contingency plan for what happens when their boss gets, um, removed." She blinked and looked up at Blaine. "But that doesn't solve the problem of the Silver Wing."

"No, it doesn't," Blaine agreed.

"So...you're saying you wanna go after whoever commission the Silver Wing, because they're the ones who control Team Rocket? If they were gone, then getting rid of Team Rocket *would* be permanent."

"That's cool and all," Ash said, "but last time I checked, we don't even know who's above Team Rocket, if there's even anybody at all. We gotta focus on what's happening right now at your front door." He pointed back toward the entrance and glared at Blaine.

"Is that the Thunder Badge?" Blaine asked. "You're familiar with Lt. Surge, then."

Ash touched two fingers to the Thunder Badge. "Yeah, Surge 'n me go way back. He used to be like you, hiding behind the excuse that it's not your problem Team Rocket's messing things up for everyone."

"And you helped him see the error of his ways." It was more of a statement than a question.

"Damn straight. Saffron's liberated because he agreed to help."

"And Surge himself is confined to a wheelchair, perhaps disabled for

the rest of his life."

Ash was taken aback at the accusation, but he quickly recovered and pressed his lips together in a thin line. "Surge's a hero. He saved a lotta people that day."

"I've had my fill of heroism, young man. Surge thought he could be a hero once, too, and he has the scar I gave him to remember that folly. You've seen one battle in your lifetime, but I've seen whole nations rise and fall and bury their so-called heroes in the blood and sweat of the innocent and the damned. In death, we're all the same, it doesn't matter which side we fought for.

"You say you want to 'get rid of' Team Rocket, but you don't know the first thing about them or what their true goal is. You don't even know who set them on this course in the first place. Like my Gym Leader colleagues on the mainland, you don't see the bigger picture informing the day-to-day. Why do you think I brought my people to Cinnabar and seceded from the mainland? Because I didn't want to share or play nice? Think again. Life is not a game, and there's no such thing as heroes and knights that'll swoop in and save the day. We're all monsters here. I've simply removed myself from the path of monsters bigger than me."

"Ash." Lily put a hand on his shoulder before he could respond. "It's okay."

"How is it okay? We need his help!"

"Blaine," Lily said. "You said you seceded to get away from bigger monsters. Who're you talking about, if not Team Rocket?"

He remained silent.

"Wait, are you...afraid?"

"Watch your tongue," Marla said.

"You *are* afraid," Ivy said. "I can smell it on you."

"Who could possibly be enough of a threat to scare Blaine of Cinnabar?" Gary said. "My Gramps would tell me stories about you in the war, how you and your Fire-types were unbeatable. The Johtoans ran screaming from *you*."

"It was a different time, and I was a younger man," Blaine said

cryptically.

"Whatever it is, we can help," Lily said. "That's why we came here in the first place. Please, Cinnabar's my home, too."

Blaine hesitated before choosing his words. "There are things... Things you won't believe even if I tell you. You won't want to believe them. To convince the unbelieving is a matter of producing the right proof, but no amount of proof can convince the unwilling."

"Try us," Ivy said. "There's not a lot left in this world that I'd put past the disgusting capacity of men."

"Young lady, you have no *idea* the beast you've stumbled upon in your hero's charge."

A muffled blaring sound came from beyond the entrance to the arena, and when someone opened the door, its piercing shrill sent a tremor down Lily's spine. Somewhere, an alarm had gone off. A soldier jogged toward the arena in a sweat with a Vulpix hot on his heels.

"General, Colonel Marla," he said with a salute. "Dr. Nimbus. We have a situation."

Nimbus stood up. "What's going on?"

"It's the volcano. We're getting seismic readings off the charts. It came out of nowhere, and that's not the half of it."

"Well? Spit it out, Cadet!" Marla said.

The cadet swallowed hard. "Ma'am, we've got confirmation of a naval attack coming in from the northwest. They appear to be Johtoan ships. The air raids have already started over the plantations to the north."

"Johtoan?" Ivy said. "No way."

Blaine got up, and it was then that Lily noticed the sleek, black armor slashed with fiery orange under his civilian's clothes. At his full height, he stood at a fair five-feet-ten-inches, and he was lean as a prime cut steak despite his advanced age.

"Olivine?" he asked.

"No, sir. They were flying black and red."

"Team Rocket!" Ash blurted out. "Did the soldiers have a red 'R' on their uniforms?"

The cadet looked at Ash nervously. "Some, yes, but not all."

Calm as ever, Blaine turned to Marla and Nimbus. "Doctor, get to the bottom of those seismic readings. I suspect foul play, and I won't have this volcano wipe out my entire island today."

"Y-Yes, sir." Nimbus scurried toward the entrance.

"Marla, get the CATs ready. I want every Charizard on Cinnabar sky high in ten."

Marla nodded stiffly and tossed out a Pokéball. A hulking Charizard coalesced in the light and snarled viciously. It raised no complaint when Marla walked to its left flank and climbed up into the saddle.

"Hey, wait a sec." Ash released his own Charizard, who immediately growled in challenge when it sighted Marla's Charizard. "I can help."

"Young man, the Charizard Assault Team is made up of elite soldiers and well-trained Pokémon. We have no room for high-strung boys looking for an impressive way to die," Marla snapped.

Ash ignored her and swung up onto Charizard with Pikachu at his lap and Gengar cloaking his shoulders. "I don't plan on dying anytime soon."

"We don't have time to argue. Marla, take him with you." Blaine looked between the foursome and hardened his gaze. "You said you came here to help with Team Rocket? It looks like you'll get your chance after all. Follow me."

"Ash," Gary said.

Ash saluted him. "Don't worry, I'll save you a few Rockets if you hurry."

Marla nudged her Charizard, and it leaped into the air and climbed toward the mouth of the volcano high above. Ash bade his Charizard follow, and the orange lizard took off with a grumpy snarl.

"So now you wanna fight Team Rocket?" Ivy said to Blaine as he led them at a brisk pace out of the arena.

"I'm not about to ignore a direct attack. Team Rocket or Johto, I don't

care who it is."

"Could Team Rocket really be attacking all of Cinnabar?" Lily said.

"Maybe," Gary said. "They have to be desperate after what happened in Saffron and Fuchsia. I don't like desperate."

"Desperate means they'll go all out," Ivy said. "If it's really what it looks like, we've got a nasty fight ahead of us."

"This is no fight," Blaine said as he led them through another door that opened up into a cave hollowed into the side of the volcano. Hundreds of soldiers dressed in armor identical to Blaine's scrambled into formation. Some mounted Arcanine and Rapidash and Ponyta, while others released Ninetales and Magmar outfitted with specially-crafted armor for extra protection. "This is war."

"Sir." Carvalho appeared with his Rapidash and swiftly dismounted. "We just received word that foot soldiers have landed on the northern coast. They're advancing south and poisoning the fields as they go. I authorized a full evacuation of the northern and western districts."

"You should have deployed instead of waiting. Go now. I want the intruders stopped before they reach the city limits."

"Sir," Carvalho saluted.

"I'll go with him," Gary said. He released Arcanine, and the robust canine pawed the ground. "Ivy?"

She grinned. "Get me to the front lines, and we'll make sure no one gets past."

Carvalho eyed them skeptically. "My men won't be responsible if you get yourselves killed."

Ivy released Houndoom and let Gary give her a boost onto Arcanine's back. "Back at you."

Blaine was already walking away toward where the infantry forces were gathering with their Pokémon, who were too small to ride. Lily looked between Gary, Ivy, and the retreating Blaine and shook her head.

"Guys, I'm going with Blaine. Please be safe!"

"Hey, Lily! Wait!" Ivy called out to her.

But Lily had already run off after Blaine and caught up just as he was addressing the infantry.

"This is not a drill, ladies," he said in that whisper voice that boomed throughout the cave. "Attack to kill. We'll be heading out after the cavalry, and I want no blood beyond the northern city limits. That's an order."

"Sir, yes sir!" the soldiers saluted.

Ninetales, Magmar, Charmeleon, and Flareon waited patiently as their trainers outfitted them with Brigandine-model armor customized for their body shapes. On the other side of the cave, Carvalho and his Rapidash were herding the other mounted trainers and soldiers outside, and Lily caught sight of Ivy and Gary on Arcanine with Houndoom trotting alongside them. Maybe it had been a mistake to go with Blaine instead of them.

"Miss Kida." Blaine's voice cut like a razor, and she whipped around. "Perhaps you should evacuate to the southern coast."

Lily steeled her nerves and tossed out two Pokéballs. Dragonair and Dodrio emerged from the light and flanked her sides. A nearby Charmeleon hissed at the unfamiliar scents, and all eyes turned to where she stood opposite Blaine.

"No, I'm here to help. I can fight."

Blaine eyed her Dragonair but made no move to approach.

He selected a Pokéball from his belt and tossed it out. Even when the light faded, for a second Lily thought she was looking at a sentient bundle of flames of a height with Blaine. But as her eyes adjusted, she saw that the creature's flesh itself swam with tendrils of fire that flickered from every pore. Like a Rapidash or Ponyta, flames grew from its scaled tail and cloaked its broad shoulders and head like armor. Curled, wormy lips revealed fine, sharp teeth, some cracked and yellowed with age, though the lust in its eyes was in no way diminished by its years. Its thick arms, almost too bulky to be proportionate with its body, flexed squat, jagged claws and glowed at the palms with shimmering, white-hot power.

"Magmortar and I will be leading the charge. Keep up if you can. No one will wait for you."

Lily nodded and followed Blaine to the front of the group. Dodrio's

three heads began to squabble amongst themselves, but she laid a hand on the bird's side to calm her down. Dragonair remained cool and unnerved, but it stayed close to Lily in its silence. Pikachu remained alert at her shoulder and climbed onto her head, tail twitching.

"Dody, Tiny, ChuChu," she whispered so the other soldiers to her left and right wouldn't hear. "Ash and the others're counting on us. Let's do our best."

And try to stay alive, too, she added silently.

Blaine gave the command, and his soldiers fell into step behind him in rows of twelve. Lily ran a hand down Dragonair's sleek neck for luck and stepped out of the cave into the blazing sun after them.

Ariana, Proton, and Petrel had already deployed by sea and air and left Giovanni alone on the deck of the Johtoan destroyer. The Resistance Army had come through beautifully and padded Team Rocket's numbers. After the slashing his team had suffered in Saffron and Fuchsia, there was no choice but to call in fresh reinforcements from Goldenrod, Olivine, and Mahogany. Cinnabar's ruddy shores loomed just a few paddle strokes ahead, and he admired the volcano beyond. A team of mounted trainers on Charizard poured from the volcano's mouth and took to the skies, but their numbers were limited. Giovanni allowed himself a small grin of satisfaction.

"There it is," he said to the young man standing next to him. "Our ticket to the future I always envisioned for us. Blaine doesn't stand a chance, and he doesn't even realize it."

The young man to Giovanni's right said nothing and merely stared ahead.

"But we can't let them have all the fun. Part of being a leader is to know your soldiers, be it in battle or in the boardroom. Are you ready to fight, Marco?"

Marco's jet-black armor was emblazoned with the red Rocket 'R' over the left breast, and his shoulder-length red hair was tied back in a low ponytail to keep it out of his face. His wounds were healed, and his only visible silver eye was wide and unseeing. Giovanni put a hand on his shoulder. The slim, metal tentacles that grew out of the headpiece on the left side of his face twitched and burrowed deeper into his ear and left eye socket. But Marco made no peep of complaint. He wiped a

stray drop of blood that had escaped his gouged out eye socket and trickled onto his stubbled cheek.

"Yes, Father."

A strange warmth fluttered in Giovanni's heart, but it soon burned hot with the familiar ambition that had sustained him this long. He looked down on his only son with the kind of selfish pride only a man with nothing about to take back everything could muster.

"Excellent. Let's not keep them waiting any longer."

22. Cinnabar Island, Part 2

Triumvirate, chapter 22: Cinnabar Island, Part 2
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Houndoom was a sleek shadow next to Arcanine as the two canines loped side by side in the sea of mounted Fire-type Pokémon. Sinister and gaunt compared to Arcanine's natural majesty and pomp, the hellhound's malicious aura nevertheless kept the other mounted Pokémon a respectable distance from Gary and Ivy. Arcanine's tongue lolled and dripped saliva as it loped through town and to the north, where the invaders were raiding plantations on their way inland. Carvalho led the cavalry charge with his mighty Rapidash, which had been draped in a light but tough layer of armor to protect its exposed belly and front. The afternoon sun dipped toward the western horizon and offered plenty of light, but the looming Mt. Cinnabar cast a shadow over the cavalry's path as they forged ahead.

"You think Team Rocket could really be causing the volcanic activity?" Ivy said over the wind as they ran.

Gary tightened his hold on her arms wrapped around his waist. "Dunno. There are Pokémon that could be causing the seismic activity though. Dugtrio, for example, but they're not native to Cinnabar."

Carvalho's whistling drew Gary's attention to the northern coast, where only a few miles out of town he could see the destroyers that had made anchor off Cinnabar. Water Pokémon ferried people to shore, and Flyers carried them through the air. The destroyers, two of them, flew Team Rocket's colors true as day.

On Carvalho's whistled command, the cavalry dispersed into a line and the mounted trainers and soldiers drew their weapons—spears, lances, and swords. The invaders, those that approached on foot, noticed their advance and scrambled together in a shield formation. Pokémon, mostly Poison and Grass types that had been soiling the crop fields with their venom and filth, gathered near their trainers and prepared to block the cavalry. White lights flashed, and Gary counted Venusaur, Muk, Weezing, Tauros, and a pair of mean-looking Rhydon among the scores of people and Pokémon.

"Those uniforms," Ivy said. "That's the Johto Resistance Movement!"

Mixed in with the Rocket Agents, JRM rebels and their Pokémon

barked orders and directed the shield wall, pulling everyone into place. Muk blended together to create a giant, amorphous blob of sludge between the larger Pokémon, and the trainers themselves banded together with polycarbonate shields.

"Damnit, they're working together?" Ivy hissed.

Gary was more concerned with his fellow charging trainers, who showed no intention of slowing as they barrelled toward the enemy.

"Fire!" Carvalho shouted.

To the left and right, Ponyta and Rapidash and Arcanine all burst into flames with their riders on their backs. War cries and shouts of victory followed suit as the entire charging line moved as one sweltering, roaring flame.

Here goes nothing, he thought to himself.

"Arcanine, Flame Wheel!"

Arcanine yipped and kicked up fire beneath its massive paws. The flames snaked up its legs and filled its magnificent mane. Gary shielded his eyes from the stinging heat and Ivy held on tighter, but the fire never burned him. Blinking through his own sweat and the shimmering heat, all he could see for the next three seconds was fire, dancing as though with a life of its own. The line of fire collided with the Team Rocket invaders and spilled over them like a sandstorm.

The smell hit him before the screams—putrid, charred flesh and burned sludge, smoking vines and shriveled skin. The fire worked fast and hungry, eating anything and anyone in its path. Gary closed his watering eyes, unable to withstand the acrid sting, but Houndoom snarled not six inches to his left and Crunched down on something made of muscle and bone. He heard it snap and grind, but all he saw was the fire.

In that split second before sound, he was sure it couldn't be worse than the smell. But when the screams started, he couldn't pretend like this was anything other than the butchery it was. He opened his eyes, and the world was ablaze with fire and smoke and blood, and only the singing of steel drowned out the wails.

Ivy was already off Arcanine's back before Gary could regain himself. Knives drawn, he watched as she seamlessly slunk to the ground and jumped right back up again into the belly of a disoriented Rocket

Agent. Her blades found the vulnerable joints in his armor, right at his navel, and his brown eyes widened in shock for a split second before they faded and drooped. Gary wondered if the guy had even felt her blades gut him at all.

Ivy drew her knives out of the fallen Rocket with a soft gurgling sound and turned back to Gary as the guy hit the ground. "C'mon!"

Houndoom was at her side in an instant. Orange flames flickered in its bloody maw with each exhaled breath as it quivered in anticipation of its next fight. Remembering himself, Gary dismounted and picked up the spear that had belonged to the exsanguinating Rocket Agent Ivy had gutted. He then climbed back on Arcanine.

"Ivy," he said.

She tossed out a Pokéball and Tyranitar appeared in all its insolent glory like a force of nature waiting to wreak havoc on anything in its path. Its feral eye found Ivy and it brought its spiked tail around to shield her from the rest of the battlefield, but the smell of blood and burning in the air drew a hungry growl from the pit of its belly.

"I'll be fine on the ground!" Ivy said. "Just stay close!"

The plantation was burning in places, and the noxious fumes from the invaders' attempts to poison the fields made Gary's eyes water. A blob of sludge lay blackened and smoking not three feet from Arcanine, the remains of one or perhaps multiple Muk the Fire Brigades had trampled. Soldiers and Pokémon lay in melted pieces on the ground, both Rocket and Cinnabarean. A Ponyta had taken a spear to the chest, snapped it in half, and fallen under the sword. One of its severed legs was still aflame, slowly flickering out, while the horse itself lay dead in a pool of its own boiling blood. Carvalho, still mounted on his Rapidash, slashed his sword at the grounded invaders and painted a trail of red and ruin in his wake. His Rapidash's diamond-hard hooves kicked up a flurry of fire that coalesced in a deadly vortex and slammed into an enemy Machoke. As the Fighter roared in pain, Rapidash trampled it with a Stomp attack that crushed bones and ground flesh to a black, smoking pulp.

Gary watched those few seconds and saw red, red like Golduck's blood on his face and throat, hot under the afternoon sun just like today. A roar snapped him out of his horrific reverie, and he turned to see Tyranitar Hyper Beam the shit out of a swooping Pidgeot and its JRM mount. He followed the bright, orange arc of the attack as it tracked

Pidgeot and cut it through the breast like a lightning bolt, pierced through the bird's back, and finally struck the JRM soldier flying it through the stomach. His entire upper body from the chest up exploded in a rain of blood and bone, and Pidgeot crashed head-first into the smoking earth with a sickening *crack*. Ivy, perhaps sensing his eyes, looked back over her shoulder.

"Gary!" she shouted.

He didn't need any further prompting and reached for Nidoking's Pokéball. The behemoth rodent towered as tall as Arcanine and smacked its thorny tail on the ground, causing a small tremor. Gary released Espeon next to it, and the lithe Psychic immediately drew close to its bulky ally, forked tail swishing. Gary said nothing and communicated everything the Pokémon needed to know through Espeon. In silence, his team leaped into action with Arcanine on point, black smoke preceding a Flamethrower attack at a group of scrambling Rocket Agents and a Rhyhorn that charged in to protect them.

Espeon's Confusion slammed into six enemy soldiers, both Rocket and JRM, and lifted them and their Pokémon—an obese Lickitung and a Gligar—into the air.

"Oh, fuck!" one of the Rocket Agents screamed.

Gary narrowed his eyes at them, and obeying his silent command, Nidoking roared and rammed three of them with a well-aimed Poison Tail attack. The three Rocket Agents flew backward and hit their fellow agents as well as their Pokémon. Lickitung screeched, its tongue lolling across the ground, but the group fell as a heap, and the living were buried beneath the dead.

Arcanine yipped and Gary barely had time to react when a Hitmonchan rammed his canine in its left flank with a lightning-fast Mach Punch. Arcanine stumbled, and Gary threw his spear on instinct. Hitmonchan took the weapon in its shoulder, but the blow was glancing at best. The Fighter's fists began to spark with the beginnings of the Thunderpunch, and its trainer, a JRM rebel, sprinted to catch up to it, sword in hand. Gary reared back on Arcanine and shot his hand out.

"No!"

In a flash, Espeon was leaping through the air and pulsed with silvery light. The violet feline gave his darkest thoughts form and sent a

concentrated wave of energy at Hitmonchan and its trainer, ripping through them both like an invisible guillotine. Hitmonchan's fists exploded in a bloody mess, and its Thunderpunch turned on it, electrocuting it from the inside out. The trainer was torn to ribbons, his flesh flayed from his bones in strips, like beef jerky, and Gary's stomach turned at the thought. He remembered he hadn't eaten in hours, and his stomach rumbled as he watched the JRM soldier's skin peel off his body.

He didn't even have time to be disgusted with the thought as the JRM soldier's partner, presumably, ran at him with an endless supply of throwing knives and an apoplectic Hitmonlee out for revenge. Gary spurred Arcanine into a retreat, mindful of the canine's bum leg, and tossed out Scizor's Pokéball. The red mantis heard his thoughts through Espeon and took off with an ominous buzz. Nidoking had lumbered around and thundered after it on its spiky hind legs. Hitmonlee fearlessly leaped into the air for a High Jump Kick, and Scizor was more than happy to meet it halfway with an X-Scissor attack that saw Hitmonlee's left leg crushed in Scizor's iron pincer. The red mantis threw the Fighter to the ground, tore its leg clean off, and pummeled it with its other pincer until Hitmonlee was nothing but a bloody stain on the dirt.

Its trainer was not so brave, and cried out in fear as he retreated. He threw his knives, but Espeon stopped them easily enough. Nidoking ran him down, undeterred by the blades that sparked against its thick hide, and held the soldier down by his middle and bit off his head with its powerful jaws. Gary wiped his mouth with a hand, and it took him a moment to realize it wasn't shaking. Golduck's blood was long washed away down some drain, and he was still here, surrounded by death. Death he'd caused.

"Dark Pulse!" he heard a familiar voice shout.

Tyranitar and Houndoom leveled a twenty-foot radius with their combined stygian energy, incapacitating some seven or eight Rocket Agents in the process. Gary blinked and set his jaw, and he pulled Espeon into his lap.

Move, he commanded his team via the Psychic feline's telepathic link.

They moved.

Ash cast Lily one last glance as Charizard beat the wind and rose

toward the mouth of the volcano, but soon she was too small to discern through the shimmering heat. Pikachu squeaked in his ear, and he tore his gaze away to search for Marla and her Charizard. They were nearly at the mouth of the volcano, but just before cresting the edge, she ducked into a cave Ash wouldn't have noticed if he wasn't watching her. He followed, but the closer they got to the mouth of the volcano, the more he saw. It wasn't just one cave, but many openings drilled directly into the rock in a honeycomb formation. When he landed behind her in one of them, she was already dismounted and punching in a code on an electronic panel in the stone wall.

"Don't bother dismounting," she called back to him. "We won't be staying long."

He peered at her through the shadowy gloom and followed her with his eyes as she removed her bedecked jacket with its many medals and hung it on a rack. Now that he was looking, he noticed that the cave was outfitted with several such amenities, including a wide water trough, shelves carved into the wall, and even an old, wooden chest that Marla bent over and rummaged about in. She pulled on some gloves that stretched over the sleeves of her armor, and she pulled her curly, red hair back into a messy bun to keep it out of her face. A door at the far end of the cave opened abruptly, and a skinny cadet about Ash's age saluted her, though she didn't bother looking up at him.

"Ma'am, the CATs are assembling now and should be ready for takeoff in five."

"Fine," Marla said. "Just make sure they know this isn't a drill."

"They're aware, Ma'am. I called them in at the first seismic alarm."

"Good. Now get back to work, Cadet."

The cadet saluted her again and excused himself the way he'd come. Ash's Charizard growled and hunkered down on all fours as it assessed Marla's beast.

"Your Charizard's got a taste for blood," Marla said, rising from the chest. "You should keep him on a tighter leash."

Ash frowned. "Charizard kinda does what he wants. But he comes through for me when I need him."

"Hm. Charizard are Dragon's blood. The only thing Dragons know is other Dragons. The rest are either soon to be dinner or dust." She

paused and regarded him. "Never heard of Imago commanding a Charizard, though."

"First time for everything."

Her flinty eyes were as unreadable as ever, and she walked briskly back to her Charizard to mount it once more. "You may be hard to kill, but fire doesn't discriminate, and dead is dead. I'm not your babysitter, so you'll have to watch your own skinny ass up in the air. And if you slow me down, I'll shoot you out of the sky myself."

Marla directed her Charizard toward the mouth of the small cave, and Ash gave her a wide berth. Gengar sent a shivering tremor down his spine, and he winced.

And I thought Erika was a tough crowd...

Pikachu began to spark with weak static electricity, and Charizard stamped its stubby front claws on the stone floor. Black smoke curled from its nostrils, and Ash patted its scaled neck.

"That's it, buddy," Ash said. "I promise you can burn as many Rockets as you want once we're airborne."

Charizard growled, a malevolent rattling sound that gave Ash the creeps. Maybe it was the volcano's heat putting Charizard so on edge. He didn't have time to ponder the thought when Marla whistled shrilly.

"Fly!" she shouted.

Ash and Charizard joined her at the mouth of the cave where he had a good view of the many honeycombed pockets carved right into the volcano's walls. Bright lights flashed and armored soldiers carrying crossbows on their backs mounted their rides. On Marla's command, they shot out of the caves two and three and four at a time, a swarm of sunburned scales and leathery, blue wings that churned the heat in the volcano with every monstrous beat of wings. Ash lost count of them after about twenty or so, but he guessed there had to be more than double that number. Charizard roared all of a sudden and spread its wings, eager to join its brethren as they erupted from the mouth of the volcano.

"That's a shit ton of Charizard," Ash said.

Marla almost grinned, but her painted lips pressed together in a thin

line to hide it. "The CATs are Cinnabar's ultimate weapon. Not many get to see them up close without being a target."

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

Marla did grin this time, and Ash had to keep himself from flinching at the sensation of his skin crawling. "Don't lag behind."

Without further warning, she nudged her Charizard and the beast leaped into the air, circling its kin and climbing higher out of the volcano. Before Ash could command Charizard to follow, the orange lizard was already in the air and snarling, unwilling to be left behind. He was at the tail-end of the swarm, and when Charizard cleared the mouth of the volcano, the sun momentarily blinded him. Hissing, Ash covered his goggled eyes and tried to blink the light away. Charizard swerved in midair, and Ash held on for dear life while Gengar began to giggle uncontrollably. In a matter of seconds, his vision cleared enough to see properly.

"Whoa!"

A swarm of no less that sixty Charizard, each carrying a rider, soared in V-formations. They were identically armored and saddled, with indiscernible riders all bearing crossbows and swords and other hidden weaponry. Together, the entire group flew some four or five hundred feet above ground, past the city and its suburbs toward the northern coast.

Pikachu squeaked and sparked all of a sudden, and Ash squinted through his goggles toward the northern sea. He could make out two huge destroyers flying Team Rocket's emblem and colors, as well as scores of people and Pokémon making their way to the coast. But what held Ash's attention was the small army of enemy Flyers taking off from the destroyers' decks—Pidgeot, Fearow, Noctowl, Golbat, even a few Yanmega who dwarfed their fellow Flyers both in size and the racket they made as they flew. The cavalry hadn't arrived yet, but the terrestrial forces were already making headway inland alongside a variety of Poison-type Pokémon that left a trail of ruin and rot in their wake.

Ash tore his eyes away from the destruction and searched for Marla's fiery red hair. He spotted her in one of the V-formations toward the front, where she made a gesture with her left hand that the other mounted trainers understood. They broke away, some above and some below, but they remained within their V-formation groups of about

seven Charizard each. Ash patted Charizard's neck.

"Let's catch up!" he shouted over the wind.

Charizard shot forward like an orange torpedo and bypassed several full formations until he came up at the tail end of Marla's group. Her Tamer's aura, a brilliant orange glow that trailed behind her seemed to merge with her Charizard's ignited tail, as though she herself was on fire. Ash's Charizard snapped its jaws as it drew up next to another of its kind. The Cinnabarean soldier who rode it spared Ash a perplexed look, but Ash saluted him with a smile. When Gengar rose from his shoulders and mimicked Ash's greeting, the poor soldier cried out and nearly fell out of his saddle.

"Uh, sorry!" Ash called out to him.

They were coming up on the enemy Flyers, who had also begun to disperse following some kind of formation. The fighting started suddenly and brutally and totally without warning. One moment, Ash was flying alongside the stunned soldier still recovering from the shock of seeing a Ghost for the first time in his life, and the next he was by himself as Marla and her formation put on the brakes and their Charizard all pulled back.

"Flamethrower!" Ash heard Marla shout.

"Oh shit!"

Ash pulled back on Charizard, and the great lizard spread its wings and shot straight up in the air just in time to avoid death by rotisserie. The seven Flamethrowers roiled and churned and sent a wall of molten fire at the speeding pair of Pidgeot, a Fearow, and three Golbat, all of whom did their best to swerve out of the way to varying degrees of success. Ash had little time to admire the CATs' teamwork and power when Noctowl, under the command of a trainer riding a PIdgeot, glowed blue with Confusion and sped straight for Charizard.

"Not that shit again," Ash spat.

Gengar dispersed into a thick cloud, only its red eyes remaining of its original form, and opened a black mouth to swallow the Noctowl whole. The Pidgeot's rider, a Rocket Agent judging from his uniform, screamed at the sudden and ghastly counterattack, and his Noctowl hooted in fright. But it was too late, and Gengar's Night Shade eclipsed the sun and devoured Noctowl in one gulp. The owl's body, deformed with numerous open fractures and covered in blackened, poisoned

feathers, fell from the cloud and hurtled to the ground five hundred feet below.

Ash patted Charizard's neck. "The Pidgeot!"

Charizard was more than happy to oblige and shot forward after Pidgeot and its stunned rider. The huge bird squawked and tried to catch an updraft to position it better, but Charizard's fire was faster than the wind. A searing Flamethrower blasted the bird and grazed its right wing, burning up the feathers and roasting flesh, right down to the bone. Pidgeot and its trainer fell, and rushing wind drowned out their collective shrieks long before they hit the ground.

Pikachu sparked angrily at Ash's lap, shocking him mildly. He winced and laid a hand on the little rodent's head. Below, the cavalry was coming in on Arcanine and Ponyta and Rapidash, but a quick scan didn't reveal any of Ash's friends. When the line burst into flame and barrelled right into the invading forces, Ash nearly choked on his own tongue.

Fire Brigades. They really weren't kidding.

A howling sound zeroed in on Ash from somewhere above, but when he looked up the sun was too bright in his eyes. Gengar, however, had no such handicap and rushed back to Ash. The Ghost took control of his motor skills and turned Charizard in a dive just as something scraped Ash's shoulder and cut into the side of his head behind the ear. He cried out and Pikachu clung to his chest. Gengar withdrew in a split second, and Ash's vision cleared. The howling he'd heard was an otherworldly buzzing, and its source was an enormous Yanmega that now plummeted after Charizard. Its rider leveled a crossbow at Ash and fired off small but deadly bolts, identical to the one that had grazed the side of his head. Blood clogged his ear and seeped into his armor at the neck, but there was no time to focus on the pain.

The Yanmega's trainer, a man in a JRM uniform, shouted something and Yanmega's wings began to glow blue. Maybe the bolt had cut a little too deep into his head because the next thing Ash knew, the air around Yanmega began to shake like a sonic wave. The rippling currents, invisible, narrowed to a column of energy and rocketed after Charizard and slammed into its lower back. Gengar materialized behind Ash to protect him from the Bug Buzz attack, but Charizard roared in pain. There was no external damage that Ash could detect with a glance over his shoulder, but Charizard's pain was real enough.

"Damnit, Fly!"

Ash gave Charizard total control and held on as the winged lizard tucked its wings in a deep dive, more angry than hurt. Yanmega was fast and dove after them. Ash squinted through his goggles as he passed other Charizard engaged in their own aerial battles.

Pikachu can't aim while we're diving, but that thing's right on my ass!

As though reading his mind, Pikachu burst with a Thunderbolt that arced over Ash and Gengar but missed Yanmega by an embarrassingly wide margin. The yellow rodent squeaked in panic as Charizard's erratic flying jostled it, but no matter what they did Yanmega held its tail.

"Charizard!"

Charizard evened out just twenty feet above the ground and passed dangerously close to the fighting cavalry forces. Yanmega followed. The scent of blood and smoke and venom filled his lungs and constricted them in a wheezing cough. He was about to send Gengar after Yanmega and hope the Ghost's aim was true enough to catch the speedy Flyer, but just then Yanmega's rider screamed. A protracted sizzling ended in a squelching explosion behind Ash, and he turned to see a Hyper Beam dying down. Yanmega's carapace, still twitching, tumbled to the earth with its rider, and Ash followed their fall with his eyes.

Ivy and Tyranitar watched him turn and rise with Charizard, and Ash nearly burst out laughing.

"Hell yeah! Man, am I glad we met her!" Ash whooped as he encouraged Charizard to ascend and join the other mounted Fire Brigade forces.

His transient high plummeted once more when he spotted Marla and another of her soldiers facing off against three Pidgeot. The birds' riders were not shy about sharing their crossbow bolts, and just as Ash leveled with the attackers, he watched one of the bolts hit the Cinnabarean soldier square in the face through his left eye. The guy slipped out of his saddle, and his Charizard, momentarily stunned, was a little too slow to avoid one of the Pidgeot's raptor talons that ripped into its back in a blindingly fast Sky Attack. The wounded lizard roared in pain and let loose an errant blast of fire that hit Marla and her Charizard, but she held out her hand to meet it and the fire bounced back as though it had hit a wall. The wounded Charizard

plummeted to the ground, unable to stay airborne with a chunk of its lower spine ripped out.

"Shadow Claw!" Ash barked.

Gengar took off like a creature out of a nightmare and dispersed into a noxious cloud bigger than Charizard. It manifested a disembodied, clawed hand and ripped into the Pidgeot that had just killed a Charizard and closed around the bird's trainer. The woman didn't even know what hit her when the icy fingers ripped into her and drew out a pearlescent smoke from the phantom incisions. Her eyes bled black and white smoke rose from her mouth, eager to escape as she convulsed. Her Pidgeot, spooked but unaffected, squawked and tried to escape. The sudden burst of speed jostled the rider and she fell from the saddle, long dead before she hit the ground. Ash didn't watch her fate, more concerned with the remaining two Pidgeot ganging up on Marla.

"Fire Blast!" she shouted.

Her Charizard spat out a thick, blue fire spout that one of the Pidgeot Mirror Moved back at the orange lizard with a mighty flap of its wings, but Charizard kept up the attack and flew after Pidgeot. Marla seemed undeterred by the extreme heat surrounding her and pushed Charizard forward. Pidgeot attempted to beat back the Fire Blast again, but it proved futile under the constant, concentrated assault unlike Ash had ever seen. The Fire Blast, instead of dwindling as Charizard lost breath, instead grew in heat and intensity and soon overwhelmed Pidgeot. The bird screeched as the flames flash roasted it. Its skin popped and sizzled, and its downy feathers melted to ash under the extreme heat.

The third Pidgeot and its Rocket trainer swooped in from behind in another Sky Attack aimed for Marla's and her Charizard's backs, but Ash chased after them. Just as Marla and her Charizard succeeded in immolating the second Pidgeot and its rider, the third Pidgeot closed in for the one-hit kill. Marla whipped around and leveled her crossbow at the enemy trainer.

"Thunder!"

Pikachu scampered up Charizard's neck and leaped into the air before exploding like a popped light bulb. A thick bolt of lightning zigzagged after Pidgeot and caught its long crest. The electricity traveled along the painted feathers and ignited over Pidgeot's body, catching its rider

in the ensuing shock. Ash watched briefly as rider and Pokémon convulsed and bent out of shape. Eyes burst, hair shriveled to dust, and exposed skin erupted with blisters that grew, festered, and popped in the blink of an eye.

Ash swiped Pikachu out of the air as Charizard passed beneath its fall and settled the little rodent back in his lap. They flew by Marla and her Charizard, and she graced Ash with a diamond-cut glare, crossbow still aimed behind her. Ash saluted her as he had her subordinate at the beginning of all this and let Charizard soar on ahead to the next target. All around, fellow Charizard and their Cinnabarean riders spewed fire, unleashed projectile weapons, and flew with the kind of grace and precision only monsters on the hunt could capture. A stray Flamethrower whizzed past Ash's head, nearly searing his hat, which was half caked with blood from the crossbow bolt he'd suffered earlier. Below, the cavalry and infantry had blended together in their fight.

"That's the real problem, out there," Ash said, eyes on the two destroyers anchored a quarter mile off the northern beach. "Charizard, I hope you're ready to try out that new Blast Burn attack."

Charizard roared and raced north toward the destroyers, unleashing Flamethrowers left and right at anything that flew too close. Gengar, giddy and giggling, cloaked Charizard in a violet miasma that tinted its fire indigo and sent a mounted Golbat screaming for safety.

"Let's go say hi to the big man in charge."

The cavalry was far ahead of the infantry by the time Lily and Blaine made it out of the volcano. She hadn't taken more than three steps when the earth rumbled underfoot for a brief couple of seconds. Blaine's Magmortar made an angry sucking sound as it worried its wormy lips, and Lily hastily averted her eyes. Blaine himself frowned more deeply than he'd been frowning before.

"Men," his voice sounded over the vast infantry force of some three-hundred soldiers, roughly half of whom stood by Pokémon ready for battle. "If you spot any enemy Ground-type Pokémon, kill on sight."

"Sir, yes sir!" their voices tumbled over each other.

Lily ran a hand through Dodrio's thick feathers for reassurance. The bird was agitated by the smell of smoke and burning things. Dragonair, while the picture of calm on the outside, kept a wary eye

on Magmortar and stayed close to Lily. She glanced back at the volcano, wondering if it would actually erupt today, and suddenly a swarm of Charizard burst from the mouth like sentient tendrils of fire. Her mouth hung open at the sheer number of them. Like the other island natives, she'd witnessed the CATs' drills every once in awhile, but they largely kept to the west away from the human population when they trained. To see them in full deployment was a humbling sight, and it lifted her spirits. Blaine was one man, but an army of Charizard could do some serious damage. They were the reason Blaine's Fire Brigades had garnered such a notorious reputation during the Great War eighteen years ago.

Ash, please stay safe, she thought to herself as she followed the swarm passing overhead.

The march north was several miles, and the infantry set a brisk pace. A Flareon trotted alongside its trainer next to Lily, and she couldn't help but notice the cadet's stolen glances at Dragonair.

"Hey, what's your name?" she asked the dark-skinned soldier.

He whipped his head around to face forward, brow furrowed and beaded with sweat. "I'm just a cadet, ma'am, no one important."

"Well, I'm just a scientist. But today, we're fighting to save our home, so I'd like to know who's fighting with me, you know?"

The cadet cast a glance at Blaine just ahead, but the old man didn't turn. "Malik, ma'am," the cadet said. "I'm a new recruit, just a year into my training."

Lily smiled for him. He couldn't have been much older than her. "Well, that's about ten months you got on me."

The cadet returned her smile, and his Flareon swished its fluffy tail. Embers fell in the orange feline's wake, casting small char marks in the dirt.

"You got any other Pokémon besides Flareon?"

"Sandslash," Malik said shyly. "He's a tough little guy. My little sister nicknamed him Barbie even though he's male, but it sorta just stuck. You know, on account of the barbs and all."

Lily giggled. "Barbie, I love that! Well, I hope he's ready to fight. Two Pokémon are better than one."

Malik nodded. "Yeah, you're right."

He released Sandslash, who fell into step with Flareon and sniffed the air with its sensitive nose. Pikachu squeaked curiously on Lily's shoulder as it peered down at the little shrew.

The four miles between Mt. Cinnabar and the site of the cavalry's battle seemed shorter than they were, and soon Lily found herself at war's front door. Innumerable Flyers swooped overhead in a deadly dance of fire and feathers as the CATs fought to give the terrestrial forces the advantage.

"Ash!" Lily gasped as she saw Charizard soaring low over the ground, a huge Yanmega on its tail.

She tried to run to help him, but before she could get far, a Hyper Beam burst out of nowhere and ripped through Yanmega's carapace like a sword to the gut. Lily followed the Hyper Beam's trajectory to Tyranitar, and while she couldn't see well over the trampled wheat fields and so many heads, there was only one person she knew who had the gall to command a Tyranitar. She smiled to herself.

"Thanks, Ivy."

"Fire Punch!"

Blaine's Magmortar lunged, fist ablaze, and rammed a rotund Lickilicky just as the pink Pokémon attempted to Constrict it with its gargantuan tongue. War as upon them, and it didn't wait for her. Lily ran toward Blaine and signaled to Dodrio.

"Dody, Drill Peck!"

Dodrio leaped high into the air on powerful legs and thrust down with all three of its heads. Lickilicky, grounded from Magmortar's Fire Punch, was too slow to roll away in time. Three sharp beaks impaled it one after the other, over and over again, until Dodrio had ripped its engorged belly to shreds. The three-headed bird began to feast on Lickilicky's entrails, one taloned foot holding down the twitching Pokémon at the hip.

"Fury Swipes!"

Just as Lily turned at Malik's voice, his Sandslash ripped into a Rocket Agent brandishing a morningstar aimed for her back. Talons longer and sharper than a Pidgeot's tore into the Rocket Agent's back and cut

his armor to ribbons, along with the tender skin and muscle underneath. He hacked up blood from a punctured lung, stunned, and fell face first on the ground. Lily caught Malik's eye in surprise.

"Thanks," she said, voice strained.

"Don't mention it," he said, nodding before turning to the next challenge.

Dragonair wailed a soulful, single note and slithered alongside Lily while Dodrio feasted. She searched for Blaine, who was now busy fending off a Rhydon, a Tangrowth, and a Stantler all at the same time.

"Fire Blast," he whispered, seemingly at ease despite his dire situation.

Magmortar raised its arms and held its palms flat. They began to glow with white-hot light before bursting with blue-white fire like twin cannons. Tangrowth screamed, and while some of its vines whipped Magmortar, they incinerated on contact. Stantler had the good sense to leap to safety, but Rhydon took the hit dead on and dug its feet into the ground. The fire didn't do much to faze the goliath rhino, its shale-plated hide protection enough from the heat.

The field was aflame around Magmortar, and the smell of burnt flesh and smoke stung Lily's nose. She wiped her face and pressed forward, a singular goal in mind.

"Outrage!" she shouted.

Dragonair shot forward like a blue whip and began to emit a sinister, red glow. It slithered past Magmortar and headed straight for Rhydon. The grey rhino prepared to take the attack at its Rocket trainer's behest, but Dragonair slammed into it with relentless fury. A slam here, a lash there, all laced with draconian energy that steadily chipped away at Rhydon's tough hide. Dragonair began to coil around Rhydon.

"Horn Drill!"

Rhydon's horn spun as it tried to jab at Dragonair, but the Dragon's scales were tough as diamonds while cloaked with the Outrage aura. Lily tossed out another Pokéball and Omastar appeared from within the light, clicking its beak.

"Nauty, help Tiny!"

Omastar crawled forward on its crab-like legs, tentacles quivering, and it spat out a thick stream of water at Rhydon. The rhino was so overwhelmed that it lost its balance and fell over, giving Dragonair an opening for the final blow. Its scarred tail came down on Rhydon's middle with so much force that Rhydon's tough scales shattered and cut into its vulnerable flesh underneath. The Pokémon wailed in agony, but Dragonair rammed its head under Rhydon's jaw. Its horn pierced the exposed flesh and cut through the jugular, unleashing a spray of blood that glistened on Dragonair's sapphire scales in the dimming light of day.

Clopping hooves were Lily's only warning as the Stantler from before charged straight for her, but a white light flashed in between them just as Stantler was upon her, and suddenly the clopping stopped.

"Oh my *god*!"

An enormous Ninetales easily as large and tall as a Rapidash suddenly had its fangs in Stantler's throat and wrestled the buck to the ground, thrashing all the while. Fire smoked among its sharp incisors and cooked Stantler's flesh on contact. Ninetales yanked out a hunk of bloody, roasted flesh and chewed it down. Its nine tails spread out behind it, billowing and almost hypnotizing.

A firm hand gripped Lily by the arm and made her stand upright.

"I said, no one'll wait for you. That doesn't mean you can dawdle and space out."

Blaine had her by the arm, his severe gaze boring into her and making her feel naked. Nearby, Dragonair was calming down after its Outrage while Omastar kept a lookout. The Rhydon they'd tackled together lay dead, a ruin of blood and organs with its eyes rolled so far back in its head only the whites were visible.

People and Pokémon fell all around them. Fire rained down from above, and it rose from below. Malik's Flareon spat out a thick Flamethrower that sent a Weezing screaming as all its poisonous gas was reduced to vapor. Lily pulled her arm free of Blaine's grip.

"Thanks for the help," she said, holding his flinty gaze.

"Ew, a little young for you, ain't she?"

Blaine and Lily turned to the source of the taunt and found a lanky man armored in Team Rocket's colors stroking his goatee. It was dyed

purple to match his gelled hair, and even his voice had a clownish lilt to it. He was joined by another man, severe of expression with a scowl that cut like razor blades, and a broad-shouldered, voluptuous woman with hair as red as the Rocket 'R' emblazoned on her armor.

"You must be Giovanni's Generals," Blaine said as Magmortar and Ninetales gathered around him. "Petrel, Proton, and Ariana."

Ariana smirked. "Old, but not blind. In that case, I don't feel quite so bad killing you."

Blaine didn't bat an eye at the threat. "But there was another, Archer, right? I wonder, where's he at?"

"Dead," Lily said without thinking. She stared into Ariana's lurid eyes and saw Archer's. *Siblings.* "We killed him, Steven and me."

But you knew that, didn't you Blaine?

Ariana clenched her jaw and shoved Petrel aside so she could stand before her colleagues. "Then my search is over," she said softly. "I'll be happy to pay back that debt in full today."

Dodrio, Dragonair, and Omastar gathered around Lily, and Pikachu sparked in warning. Lily clenched her fists and tuned out the sounds of battle all around. "You can try."

Ariana sneered and reached for two Pokéballs at her belt. Proton and Petrel mimicked her actions and tossed out two Pokéballs each of their own. After the light died down, six Pokémon stood to oppose Lily and Blaine, among them a Forretress that hovered a couple feet over the ground, a scrappy-looking Beedrill, and a Mamoswine twice the girth of a Rhyhorn. But the other three were almost unrecognizable with their embedded headgear and Chimera-altered bodies. Lily covered her mouth in horror.

A Victreebel balanced on thick leaves, but instead of its usual porous, yellow skin, blue Gyarados scales grew like natural armor over its belly. They cut into the pitcher plant Pokémon's flesh, bloody with green ooze around the edges. What had once been a Golem had shed its tough scales and now glowed with an inner heat that rivaled Magmortar's. The beast dripped molten rock and drooled excessively, eyes dilated. And finally, an Ursaring towered above the rest, its lower half thorny with purple spikes that grew like a cancer from coarse fur crusted with old blood blackened with infection. A tail grew from its buttocks, half as long as its upright body, and slammed the ground in

warning much like Gary's Nidoking was wont to do. Poison leaked from the many spikes protruding from Ursaring's lower half. All three Pokémon shared the same model of headgear, tentacle-like wires that burrowed into one eye and an ear and even a mouth, in Victreebel's case.

"So this is Chimera," Blaine said, eyeing Ursaring's open-mouthed panting, breath foul with infection. "Not exactly a long-term return on investment."

"Who said anything about long term?" Ariana bellowed. "All I need is a one-hit KO! Forretress!"

Forretress began to spin rapidly and shot toward Blaine and Lily, releasing iron needles in every direction. Lily shielded her face and winced as some spikes ricocheted off her armor, but a few struck the exposed skin on her face and drew thin but painful cuts across her cheeks and ears.

"Fire Punch!" Blaine hissed.

Magmortar leaped forward, oblivious to the flying needles. They melted on contact with its skin, harmless. The bulky Pokémon lunged at Forretress, cannon-like fist clenched and aflame with fire and oozing magma. But before it could reach Forretress, the aberrant Golem intercepted and caught the Fire Punch with its bare hands. Though shorter, Golem easily matched Magmortar's strength and held it off. Its warped hide wept lava plumes that melted the rocky ground underfoot and somehow kept it from shying away from Magmortar's natural, intense heat. Magmortar hissed and spit as it was locked in a test of strength with the Chimera Golem.

Beedrill, Mamoswine, and Ursaring took advantage of the confusion and attacked. Beedrill buzzed high overhead, massive stingers glistening with poison as it locked in on Blaine himself. It flew clear of the path of Mamoswine's Icy Wind, which swept the area with the force of a tornado gale. Dragonair wailed and Dodrio squawked in fear as the ice rushed them, painting frost crystals on their skin and freezing Lily's throat so for a few terrible seconds, she couldn't breathe.

Ninetales howled and ran straight into the Icy Wind, fearless, its nine tails billowing and laced with eerie, purple fire. They each fired off ghastly Will-O-Wisps that honed in on Mamoswine and the other enemy Pokémon and grew as the Icy Wind hit them. Lily sucked in a

gasping breath when the frosty attack finally abated and sank to her hands and knees, coughing. Chancing a look up, she caught the sight of Ariana's Forretress just as the Will-O-Wisp caught up to it and enveloped it in ghostly fire. The Bug screeched, its steely flesh melting right before Lily's eyes. Mamoswine honked in pain as another few Will-O-Wisp missiles ate away at its thick, hairy hide and tried to shake itself out to put out the flames. A mess of ice crystals and fire tendrils erupted from the mammoth in all directions, and Lily had an idea.

"Now Nauty! Hydro Pump!"

Omastar, having withdrawn to its protective shell to avoid the Icy Wind attack, spun rapidly to gain traction and launched itself into the air. Foot-long tentacles and spindly appendages burst from its shell in midair and it spat out a thick jet of water from its sharp beak straight at Mamoswine. The Hydro Pump doused the fires consuming Mamoswine's fur and absorbed the ice shards it was shedding like dandruff. They froze an outer shell around the Hydro Pump just as it slammed into Mamoswine. With a guttural wail, Mamoswine teetered and fell over under the force of the attack, drenched and suffering internal bruising and broken bones. The frozen outer shell of Omastar's Hydro Pump shattered on impact, impaling the beast with icy shrapnel that drew blood and more wailing. Dodrio wasted no time in leaping to Mamoswine as it struggled to stand and attacked with all three heads. Its beaks were bloody with entrails as it tore open Mamoswine's belly with reckless abandon.

"Agh!"

Blaine had drawn a spiked flail and swung it at Beedrill, who attempted to jab and gut him with its wicked stingers. One of the stingers struck Blaine in the chest, but his armor protected him and the point drew a rip in the thin, layer of mesh that covered the harder plating underneath. Poison bloomed in a stain over Blaine's chest, but it didn't reach his skin. The spiked ball of his flail came dangerously close to Beedrill's head, but the Bug was far too fast for the old man.

Magmortar heard its master's cry for help and shoved away from Golem to intervene.

"Flamethrower!" Blaine bit out.

Magmortar raised one of its hands and the palm began to glow with heat. But Golem tackled it from behind and began to rip into its back,

careless of the fire that shot out of Magmortar's rended flesh. The flames scorched Golem's leathery face, but the Pokémon, seemingly oblivious to the pain, kept tearing.

"Finish it!" Proton shouted, backing away from the fight.

The infected Ursaring roared and charged at Magmortar on all fours, tail swishing behind it like a scorpion's ready to strike.

"No!" Lily said. "Tiny!"

Dragonair slithered to intercept Ursaring and doubled over itself to smack it away with a Dragon Tail attack. Lily ran after her Dragon with Pikachu at her shoulder, jumping over the corpse of the Rocket Agent Malik had killed in her defense. She scooped up his discarded morningstar, its weight uncomfortable in her sweaty hands but manageable. Ursaring saw Dragonair coming and grabbed its tail between meaty paws, squeezing. Dragonair wailed and cracked the rocky ground with its Dragon Tail, missing Ursaring entirely.

"Thunder!"

Pikachu leaped from Lily's shoulder and burst with static electricity that gathered in a wicked bolt and arced toward Ursaring. The modified bear roared in pain as the lightning struck it in the neck and painted angry, red ribbons in its fur that drew diseased boils on its skin. They burst and leaked pous and blood over the infected thorns protruding from its lower half. The pain was enough to cause it to loosen its grip on Dragonair, giving the serpent time to escape. Dodrio looked up from its mutilation of Mamoswine, who had finally fallen still as it was being eaten alive. Omastar huddled at Dodrio's feet.

"Say goodbye!"

Petrel came at Lily at a full sprint, a curved blade in hand. He slashed at her, and Dodrio squawked angrily. Lily backpedalled, not trusting her lack of experience in hand-to-hand combat in a real fight.

Petrel slashed deep into Lily's good arm with precision speed. His blade, thin and deadly sharp, cut through the blood-red joint at her shoulder just above her armpit and bit into soft flesh and muscle underneath. Lily cried out as blood squirted her neck and cheek, and she stumbled backward. A yip and a rush of heat was the only warning before Ninetales jumped on Petrel out of nowhere as he regained his balance and sank flaming teeth into the back of his neck. His eyes rolled back into his head, the whites spectral against his

sweat-slicked skin, and blood dribbled onto his chin. The fox ripped its head back and pulled out several vertebrae still connected by the spinal cord. Petrel's head fell forward and he hit the ground face first, unmoving.

"Goodbye," Lily said, her voice raspy with pain and adrenaline.

Beedrill's buzzing drew both her and Ninetales's attention, and the huge fox bared its bloodied teeth at Ursaring, who turned its sights on Dragonair after recovering from Pikachu's lightning attack. But Lily was more concerned about Blaine. He fumbled for a Pokéball at his belt, but lost hold of it when Beedrill came at him again with Twineedle. General or not, he was an old man who couldn't have hoped to outspeed a Beedrill unaided. She picked up the morningstar again, careless of the stinging ache in her dominant left arm, and ran as fast as she could.

With its trainer dead, Beedrill had no further orders and merely continued its relentless attack on Blaine. Just as Lily was upon them, she watched as Blaine allowed Beedrill to tear into his arm, trusting the armor to protect him from poison, and closed a bare hand around one of the Bug's thick, hairy legs. It smoked and released a rancid stench on contact, and Beedrill buzzed louder in agony. Heedless of the pain, it yanked back and ripped out its own leg, which glowed like dying embers and turned to ash in Blaine's hand. But Beedrill wasn't done and flew around for another attack, three stingers poised to kill. Blaine threw out the ash in his hand and tried to reach the Pokéball he'd lost on the ground.

Crack!

Lily jumped with all her might and swung with both hands just as Beedrill was upon Blaine. Her pilfered morningstar struck true and buried iron spikes through Beedrill's engorged abdomen. The Bug shrieked and went crashing not two feet from Blaine. It tried to lash out, but Lily pulled back and brought the morningstar down again over its bulbous, compound eye and shattered the protective, glass-like shell over it. The eye burst and splattered her with a chartreuse ooze that reeked of curdled milk. Again, she pulled back and brought the weapon down over Beedrill's head, again and again and again, just to make sure it was really dead. After the fourth bludgeoning she was slick with its liquefied innards from the waist down. Pikachu squeaked to get her attention.

"ChuChu." She turned and saw Blaine struggling to his feet. "Blaine,

are you okay? Did it sting you?"

His flinty eyes found hers briefly, and she resisted the urge to wipe the sweat from her brow. But he barely had time for her as he turned his attention to Magmortar. Jaw set, he raised his voice more than she'd heard from him yet.

"Enough! Magmortar, Overheat!"

Magmortar, still grappling with Golem, began to glow bright, too bright, and Lily had to shield her eyes. Even that didn't keep her from seeing stars as Magmortar erupted with incandescent light so stifling, she could scarcely breath. Whatever lingering chill she felt from Mamoswine's Icy Wind was gone in an instant, and she sank to her knees, weak with dizziness and nausea in the sweltering heat. When it faded, the world seemed dark by comparison. Weakly, she opened her eyes and tried to stand. Dodrio and Omastar were heading toward her, while Ninetales and Dragonair still faced off against the mad Ursaring. Magmortar rose on trunk-like hind legs, seemingly unfazed despite its hard struggle with Golem. But of the enemy Chimera experiment, there was hardly any trace left. Only a black mark riddled with smoking piles of goop in a wide, fifteen-foot radius around Magmortar remained. Bile brought a sour taste to Lily's throat as she realized what had happened.

"Solar Beam!"

Ariana's command was followed by yet another bright, white light that hurtled straight for Omastar and Dodrio. Lily's breath caught in her throat and she reached for her Pokémon. Dodrio squawked and faced the attack, Omastar safely behind it, but the Solar Beam was like none Lily had ever seen before. Victreebel gave it everything it had, and it paid off. Dodrio disappeared within the attack for all of two and a half seconds, and Lily was already screaming and running. When the light dissipated and her vision cleared, Dodrio was already on the ground smoking.

"Dody!"

She skidded to her knees at the bird's side, tears in her eyes, and took in the angry char marks and exposed, bleeding muscle where Victreebel's attack had flayed away the skin. Omastar had withdrawn into its shell and emerged now, crawling to Lily's side. She smoothed the matted, brown feathers on Dodrio's right head and held its gaze.

"Dody," she said, voice hitching.

"Forget it, kid," Ariana said. "That bird's as good as dead, just like my Forretress."

Lily ignored her and felt Dodrio's belly slowly rise and fall with its weakened breathing. Steeling herself, she hastily recalled it to its Pokéball where it would stabilize until she could get it to the Pokémon Center. But there wouldn't be much time to spare.

"That Ursaring, on the other hand," Ariana went on. "He'll at least take down your Dragonair with him. It all evens out in the end."

Lily glared up at the Rocket Admin with a hatred she hadn't felt since her imprisonment in Saffron. "You scum. Pokémon are living creatures, and you abuse them and toss them out when they're no longer useful."

Ariana frowned and arched a thin eyebrow. "What would I want with a tool that isn't useful? Stupid girl, you can keep your righteous morals to yourself. Chimera is science, and science is the future. Everything else is just cannon fodder."

Lily got to her feet and blinked her tears away. She shook with rage. "How dare you! This isn't science, it's torture!"

The sun was dipping below the horizon, and the dim lighting cast a favorable glow on Ariana's profile. She was angular in all the right places and shaped as though by a sculptor's hands, flawless and proud but repulsive to look at the more Lily thought about what she'd done to Dodrio. What she'd done to countless other people and Pokémon in the name of science. What Team Rocket had done.

"How else do you expect to get results if you don't run a few tests? You're just a little girl with pretty fantasies of a world that never existed. But lucky for you, you won't have to suffer much longer. I've got a debt to repay for my brother. Victreebel!"

Victreebel lowered its gaping maw and let loose another Solar Beam, this time directly at Lily. Pikachu squeaked at her feet and Omastar wrapped its tentacles around her ankle in fear. Lily could only stare into the light, blinded and overcome as it grew and washed out the world around her.

Gary rolled on the ground and hit his shoulder on a protruding rock before something soft broke his momentum. A JRM rebel's body, the upper half, stared up at him and he hastily scrambled to his feet. The

enemy Graveler he'd been running from caught up to him and brought down all four of its arms for the killing blow, but Nidoking's tail rammed it from the side and sent it flying head over heels some forty feet through the air, where it hit a swooping Fearow and both Pokémon fell to the ground together. Gary steadied himself on Nidoking's armored leg and pulled himself up.

"Thanks," he said, looking up at the king rodent.

A flash of orange and a familiar trail of violet smoke passed by far overhead just then and caught his eye. Ash was heading out to sea at top speed, bypassing the other Charizard still fighting. Gary followed his trajectory and saw the destroyers anchored a little ways off the coast.

"Damnit, Ash."

Nearby, Ivy was busy directing Tyranitar and Houndoom as they worked together to plow through anything that so much as looked at them funny. They pillaged, and she sneaked around them to slit throats and undercut any trainers she came across, like a machine that never tired.

Gary pressed his lips together, hesitating. But Ash was getting farther and farther away, and he didn't have time to deliberate. So he recalled all his Pokémon and tossed out his two remaining Pokéballs. Aerodactyl landed on the battlefield with a bone-rattling squawk that scared the daylights out of a pair of dueling soldiers, giving the Cinnabarean soldier enough time to get the upper hand on his Rocket opponent. Alakazam, ever silent, peered around the battlefield and calmly climbed aboard Aerodactyl's back without having to be instructed. Gary was quick to follow.

"Gary!" Ivy said, having noticed Aerodactyl's presence.

"I have to help Ash! I'll be right back!" he shouted to her over the din and clatter of war.

Aerodactyl took to the sky just as Gary was strapping himself in. He locked eyes with Ivy just before Aerodactyl turned north.

I have to help him, he thought to himself. *I'll be right back.*

Ivy could handle herself, she'd proven that time and again. The dangers of the skies left him little time to doubt his decision when a Fearow and a Noctowl came at him from behind, the Fearow bearing

a rider in Rocket armor. She had a crossbow that she fired at Gary, but Alakazam stopped the bolt and turned it back on her. Fearow squawked and tilted out of the way just in time. The sky was darkening fast as the sun slipped below the horizon. They'd already been at this for some time, but the minutes and hours blurred together in a whirl of butchery and blood. Gary didn't have time to dwell on that, either, as the Noctowl glowed blue and prepared to fend off Alakazam's Psychic attacks so Fearow could exploit an opening.

The Rocket Agent fired off another crossbow bolt, and this one ricocheted off Aerodactyl's scales and hit Gary in the back, though his armor stopped it from piercing skin. Alakazam was busy redirecting Noctowl's Confusion attacks.

Leave it! Gary screamed in his head as his intentions formed images in his mind before his thoughts could catch up. In a flash, Alakazam Teleported them behind the birds, and Aerodactyl recovered quickly. Gary laid a hand on the reptile's neck and held on, teeth clenched.

Aerodactyl rumbled underneath him and opened its mouth wide just as the Rocket Agent and her Fearow caught sight of Gary inexplicably behind her. The Hyper Beam hit her before she could even scream, a wicked orange laser that blasted clean through her and Fearow and left only pieces of the bird to fall to the ground. Noctowl hooted in fear and flew off before it could be next. An image of Koga flashed in Gary's mind, his violet eyes wide with terror and surprise, but it left as soon as it had come. Alakazam's Psychic veil blurred the dark corners of his mind, making it easier to focus on the task ahead.

"Let's go get Ash," Gary said.

Aerodactyl sped forward, and Alakazam Teleported it along. Like a rock skipping over the water's surface, Aerodactyl flashed in and out of existence and pushed ever forward, past dueling Charizard and squawking birds, amidst the teeth and claws and fire of war that drenched the ground and those below with crimson rain. An errant Ice Beam from a small, plump Delibird nearly hit Aerodactyl, but Alakazam fazed out of existence and out of danger only to reappear far out of range as it continued to fly north. Nothing could catch Aerodactyl as it warped in and out of sight, and nothing tried.

Gary was nearly upon the first destroyer, where he already saw Ash circling on Charizard and fending off some resistance from the deck. Most of the sailors were below deck or had been deployed and floated in the water far below, but now they scrambled to meet Ash's assault.

Charizard spat a violet Flamethrower laced with Gengar's phantom touch that not only melted a hole in the starboard deck, but also ate away at the metal as though it were made of rice paper. A sailor was too slow to avoid the blast area, and the violet flames licked at his ankle. A shadowy hand grew from them and grabbed him by the leg, digging elongated claws into the flesh and drawing burn welts along the skin. The sailor cried out in fear, but he went down face first. Gengar's laughter drowned out his screams until they fell silent and the Ghostly fire covered him entirely.

Alakazam's keen senses drew Gary's attention to a large man dragging what appeared to be a cannon of sorts on deck and proceeded to load and aim it at Ash. To his horror, the man had loaded a live Voltorb into the weapon and shouted some orders.

"Ash!" Gary shouted.

He urged Aerodactyl forward, but the sailor fired the cannon and the Voltorb with it. Voltorb sparked as it flew and began to pulsate with energy. The blood drained from Gary's face as he reached for Ash, too far away. But Alakazam Teleported them closer, just long enough for Gary grab Ash's hand and hear Charizard snarl in surprise. A split second later, Voltorb Self-Destructed right on top of them.

Gary's teeth crunched together so hard he was sure they'd all come loose and begun to rattle in his skull. His hand throbbed as it gripped Ash's for dear life.

Life.

They were alive.

"Ash!"

Gary let go so Aerodactyl could ride the air currents without ramming Charizard. The orange lizard was smoking and disoriented, its yellow eyes casting about uncertainly as it itched to immolate something. Pikachu was in Ash's lap, eyes squeezed tight, while Ash himself could no longer hold in his breakfast and wretched over Charizard's left side. Somewhere behind and slightly above Gary, Gengar burst out laughing.

Gary glared up at the Ghost as it leered down first at Ash, then at Gary and Alakazam who were foolishly strapped into the saddle and unable to chase after it as it floated out of reach. Alakazam's disgust hit Gary like wet blanket to the face, but he swallowed it.

"You're welcome," he sneered up at the Ghost.

"Ugh, for what? What the hell just happened?" Ash said, wiping his mouth as Charizard finally evened out its trajectory.

"Never mind, we can't stay in the air around here or that psycho will shoot us with another Voltorb can—"

Aerodactyl banked a hard right all of a sudden, and Charizard, who'd picked up on the danger long before Gary or Ash, was quick to follow Aerodactyl's example and dive. Another Voltorb Self-Destructed in the air where they'd been gliding along, and the aftershock of the explosion knocked the wind out of Gary and snapped him forward in the saddle. His teeth rattled again, and he bit down on his tongue by accident. Blood filled his mouth, and for a terrifying moment he was drowning, falling in a deluge of black rain while Aerodactyl writhed in confusion above, falling after Koga in the dark.

"Gary!"

Ash swooped in on Charizard, and Pikachu squeaked frantically. Gary blinked and spat out the mouthful of blood over Aerodactyl's side. He wiped his mouth and smeared red across his lips and cheek.

"We gotta take out that destroyer!" Ash called.

Night was settling in fast, and the stars were peeking out. Ivy was somewhere below, fighting, and now she would have the cover of night to keep her safe. Gary spat some more blood and wiped his mouth again, eyes casting about for the deck of the destroyer where the sailor was shooting at Ash and him.

"Right," he said more to himself than to Ash.

Water jets sprayed past the duo as they flew, some missing only narrowly. Charizard roared to Aerodactyl's left. The Rocket Agents in the water had turned their Pokémon on Ash and Gary and fired off Hydro Pumps and Waterfall attacks left and right. Pikachu burst with electricity and caught a particularly robust jet of water in a Thunderbolt. The lightning traveled down the spout's trunk and exploded in the water, frying the Tentacruel that had shot it, its trainer, and the Seaking and Blastoise fighting near it.

"Ash!" Gary said, scanning the destroyer's hull as Aerodactyl and Charizard swooped low over the water. "Aim for the hull! The engines!"

Ash grinned and patted Charizard. "Okay, buddy, blast 'em!"

Charizard roared and began to emanate heat. Gengar merged with Ash and cloaked him in its Aura to keep the fire from burning him, but Gary had to pull Aerodactyl away from the extreme heat Charizard was emitting.

Let's go.

Alakazam Teleported Aerodactyl and Gary high above the destroyer, where Aerodactyl sucked in a deep breath and powered up another Hyper Beam. Just then, Charizard spat out the thickest, brightest stream of fire Gary had ever seen. It was like a sun flare, alive and completely merciless as it blasted clean through the iron hull and melted through anything in its wake. Sailors began to scream, and those in the water frantically abandoned their onslaught to make for land. Gary looked down on them and thought of Janine. He thought about Lily, her words to him when he was at rock bottom. He thought about Ivy, who'd been clawing her way up from rock bottom for far longer, far harder than he would probably ever know.

Sabrina's face came alive in his shared mind with Alakazam. But Sabrina was dead, and Gary was still here.

"*The only way to kill a monster is to send a bigger one after it."*

"Burn."

Aerodactyl's Hyper Beam smashed the deck and drew a jagged crag through the iron from bow to stern. Rocket sailors screamed as they scrambled for lifeboats or simply abandoned ship and flung themselves overboard. Ash and Charizard had flown around the entire starboard stern and were coming around the port side, Blast Burning the hull as they went. When the explosions began, they weren't as loud as Gary had imagined. Ash shouted something up at him and Charizard cut off its attack to pull away, and the chain reaction built up on itself. What began as a few disjointed explosions bubbled up and burst all at once as the engine room combusted and blew out the submerged hull. Aerodactyl finished its attack and Alakazam Teleported higher in the sky where Ash and Charizard were making headway. The destroyer below went up in flames, and just as Aerodactyl and Gary reappeared near Ash, the entire structure detonated. A mushroom cloud rose from the destroyer's interior, black smoke concealing roiling, orange fire beneath, and the bow and stern shot up into the air. Split completely in half, the ship sank slowly from

the middle. The sea churned as people and Pokémon struggled to get away from the rip tide the sinking ship generated below the surface, but many disappeared below the roiling waters and didn't resurface.

"Hell yeah!" Ash whooped.

He was still a little green around the gills from the earlier emergency Teleportation, but the color was slowly returning to his face. Blood was caked to his temple and had matted his hair to the side of his head, but he was smiling.

"Let's get the other one!"

Gary nodded. "First, I wanna see who's in charge of this!"

Ash and Charizard followed Aerodactyl and him to the deck of the second destroyer faster than the sailors could regroup and fire at them again. But they met no resistance on deck when they landed. Aerodactyl squawked as it landed and lost its footing. Gary was nearly flung from his saddle when the ancient reptile compensated by digging its wing claws into the floor for balance.

"The hell?"

Charizard didn't have Aerodactyl's problem as it touched down on deck. The floor smoked around its feet, mist that rose in a veil all around it.

"Ice?" Ash said when he dismounted with Pikachu and Gengar at his side.

He kneeled down and ran a hand over the ice where Charizard's heat was melting it. Gary remained in the saddle, suspicious.

"Ash," he said carefully. "Get back on Charizard. Now."

A clear ringing in his head made him turn just as the icy layer covering the deck rose of its own accord in a frozen wave. Aerodactyl spread its wings in defense, but Alakazam was faster and Teleported to the other side of the deck behind the wave, where the ice no longer reached. It came crashing down where he'd been not a moment ago, and he covered his ears to the screeching whine of the ice shards as they cracked and shattered against each other.

"Teleporting an Aerodactyl. I suppose that merits a cursory acknowledgment."

The woman's voice made Gary shiver, like Gengar had just breathed down his neck. Alakazam's warning rang loud and clear as a bell in his head. Ash, who hadn't managed to mount Charizard again, remained on the melted bit of deck next to the fiery lizard with a hand on its flank and Pikachu on his shoulder. From the shadows near the metal door to the galley at the portside of the deck, a woman pushed off the wall and came into the dying light of day. She was accompanied by a short, humanoid Pokémon with lush, platinum blonde hair and thick lips like a woman's. But the creature's face was frostbitten black, and its sunken eyes held nothing but the promise of death. Its dress-like body was wispy and red, but its hands, like its face, were dead and black with cold.

Save for the woman and her Pokémon, the deck was mysteriously devoid of people. Gary gripped his saddle more tightly.

"Who're you?" Ash demanded. "Did you freeze the deck?"

The woman had her back to Gary, so he couldn't see her face properly. "And you must be the Medium, as dense as you are loud."

Aerodactyl growled, and the woman spared Gary's a glance askance. Her blue eyes caught the last vestiges of light from the distant horizon, almost white they were so light. The chill Gary had felt before returned then, and Alakazam's mental tug on him intensified.

"You," Gary said, throat dry. "You're Lorelei of the Elite Four."

Lorelei didn't so much as blink at him. Her armor, grey and indigo in the Elite Four's traditional colors, gleamed like the ice underfoot, untouched. The Jynx at her side swayed slightly and emitted smoke from the top of its head, smoke Gary knew to be microscopic ice crystals meant to chill the air around it.

"Two points for the Clairvoyant," Lorelei said, tone flat.

"The Elite Four?" Ash perked up. "Hey, that's great! We could really use your help out there!"

"My help?"

Something's wrong, Gary thought. Alakazam echoed his thoughts in a full-body tremor that made him shake with something other than the creeping cold on deck. *Something's very wrong.*

Ash started walking toward Lorelei. "Yeah, with Team Rocket. That's

why you're here, right? Professor Oak said he was gonna go get the Elite Four to help out on Cinnabar."

Gary's breath caught in his throat.

Gramps, where are you?

"Is that so?" Lorelei watched Ash from a safe distance and rested a hand on her hip. There were three more Pokéballs tucked away just shy of her fingers. "Well, I am here to help."

She slowly lifted her free hand and pointed to Ash. Before he could say a word, Jynx mimicked Lorelei's action and the icy wave reared up again, this time in pursuit of Ash.

"Ash!"

Gary reached for Arcanine's Pokéball, but just as the wave crashed down on Ash, Charizard released a Fire Spin attack and leaped into the sky with Pikachu clinging to its neck. The wave of ice was sucked into the vortex and turned to mist in its depths, clearing most of the deck of the layer of ice. Ash himself jumped impossibly high under Gengar's influence, fully cloaked and as insidious as the Ghost itself. The Aura gave him curved claws that elongated his hands and feet by half a foot each, and spectral horns grew from his head and tapered off in violet flames. His eyes bled purple, and his hair stood on end, spiky as thorns. When he landed on all fours, the iron he touched warped black and twisted.

"Crystallos," he said, tone grave. "You're a Tamer, too. Why'd you attack me?"

"Because I'm here to help," Lorelei said without even the barest hint of emotion. "Just not you."

With a snap of her fingers, Jynx opened her mouth and shed a cloud of frostlings. She reared back and fired off a bright, blue Ice Beam that rocketed straight for Ash. Gary gasped, and Alakazam rose up in the saddle behind him to do his bidding, reading his thoughts before he could even process them. Alakazam launched a powerful Psychic attack and swept toward the Ice Beam, intending to knock it off course and turn it back on Jynx, but the frostbitten Pokémon lifted one of her shriveled hands toward Alakazam without relinquishing her Ice Beam attack. Her pot-bellied frame glowed with sapphire light and a wind only she could feel whipped at her hair. Alakazam's Psychic wave reared up in the air and clashed with Jynx's Psychic energy, thwarted.

"Charizard!" Ash shouted.

Charizard beat its wings to dodge the attack, but the Ice Beam grazed its left hind leg and froze it. With a bellow, Charizard swooped around and spat fire at itself, desperate to get the cold out of its system.

"Ivy was right," Gary said. "The Elite Four fights with Team Rocket."

Lorelei reached for the other Pokéballs at her belt and fiddled with them in one hand. "With? You're mistaken. It's Team Rocket that works for us, of course. We're merely here protecting our assets."

"I don't believe it," Ash said as Charizard landed, limping but okay. "How can you be on Team Rocket's side? You're the goddamned Elite Four! You're s'posed to protect Kanto and Johto, preserve the peace!"

"You know, I find your hero act tiresome. I'd rather finish this quickly. Your words are nothing but white noise to me." She paused and glanced back at Gary. "You can go now."

"Like hell," Gary spat. "Where's my gramps? He went to find you at Indigo Plateau."

Lorelei regarded him coolly. "All the more reason for you to go. My colleagues were the last ones to see him."

A cold dread sank its claws into Gary's heart. "What did you say?"

"They'll be with the Reaper. Unfinished business of some sort. If you hurry, you may even catch them before they kill her."

Ivy.

The mounting suspicion surrounding Oak transformed into a very concrete concern for Ivy's welfare just then. There were four Elites, and each was worth ten regular trainers at least. If two of them had gone to find Ivy, she was in mortal danger.

"Gary," Ash called to him across the deck. "Get out of here."

His voice was doubled, like another echoed his words. Ghost fire rose off him like steam, and Aerodactyl growled in warning.

"Ash, she's..."

"Leave the Snow Queen to me. More of them're goin' after Ivy. She'll need help. I can handle one on my own."

Gary looked between Lorelei and Ash and the coast, where Ivy was still fighting and possibly unaware that two members of the Elite Four were headed her way with ill intent. The choice was made for him, though he shook with indecision. To go after Ivy would mean to leave Ash alone.

"Get the fuck outta here, Gary," Ash said in a voice that was hardly his own.

Shit.

Before he could change his mind, Gary nudged Aerodactyl into flight and they rose high above the second destroyer, leaving Ash and Lorelei alone on deck. Tears welled in his eyes at the sight of Ash growing smaller beneath him, but there was no other choice. Ash might be able to handle one, but there was no way Ivy could handle two at a time.

Ivy.

He had to find her before they did.

Ivy jammed her knife into the side of a Rocket Agent's skull to the hilt, wincing a little at the dull ache in her arm from overwork. Houndoom snarled and unleashed a wave of dark energy that caught a charging Tauros square in the chest and flung it sideways before it could ram Ivy, whereby Tyranitar caught it between its meaty hands and slammed the bull head-first into the ground. The Cinnabareans were fighting all around her, mounted and on foot, but from what she could tell little progress was being made. For every JRM soldier that fell, a Rocket Agent took out the Cinnabarean that was responsible. And so it went on, each side losing their fighting numbers and amassing mountains of corpses.

Tyranitar roared and slammed its fists into the ground, inducing an Earthquake that raced after a Machamp fighting not far away. The four-armed Fighter didn't see the attack coming and lost its balance. Its calloused foot sank into the crag and it fell, breaking its leg in the process. The Rocket Agent commanding it shrieked, and the Cinnabarean footsoldier that had been struggling with his Flareon against the Machamp went in for the kill without hesitation. Flareon roasted Machamp's head and back, and the Fighter's screams resonated in Ivy's bones before falling silent.

"Good eye," Ivy said to Tyranitar. She stayed close by the behemoth

dinosaur's side and led it to the Cinnabarean footsoldier that Tyranitar had just helped.

"You okay?"

"Y-Yeah, thanks for that," he said.

"You watch my back, I'll watch yours."

The soldier's Flareon was joined by a lean Sandslash that was bleeding from its back but still standing.

"I'm Malik," he said, brandishing his sword and trying to calm his breathing as he prepared for the next fight.

Before Ivy had a chance to reply to him, he suddenly launched into the air without warning. Surprised, Ivy scrambled away toward Tyranitar and Houndoom, eyes skyward as she followed Malik. He was was thrown by invisible hands, stopped suddenly, and screamed for the half second it took for something very fast and very dark to whiz by him too fast for the naked eye to detect. His blood rained down, and Ivy shielded her eyes as it splashed her face with his falling body. He hit the ground mere feet away from her, his entire left arm torn off at the shoulder and well into his chest, where part of his lungs and heart had been ripped out, too. Ivy tensed as a wave of nausea and fear tremored down her spine, but she swallowed the unpleasant feelings and looked around. In the encroaching darkness, her eyesight only got better. Flareon and Sandslash scattered, spooked by whatever had done in their trainer.

"I thought you'd have seen me coming. How disappointing."

That voice even after so long was so familiar to her. Instinctively, her heart wrenched and she looked around for the source. Like she'd seen a Ghost, Ivy balked at the vision of them standing before her, hardly different from the day she'd left them behind save their new armor.

"Karen," she said, barely audible.

"Oh, don't be so hard on her. She *is* all by herself, after all."

"Will."

Honchkrow landed on the ground next to Karen, about half her height and fluffy with feathers. Will held out his arm for Xatu, and the bird landed silently, curling its talons around the leather bracer Will wore

over his gleaming grey and indigo armor. But aside from their attire, nothing much else had changed.

"Ivy," Karen said.

Hearing her own name made Ivy tense. Tyranitar sensed her agitation and growled.

"We've missed you," Will said. "You left without saying goodbye, you know."

"I got out."

"Yes, we *know*."

"You've grown so much," Karen said.

Ivy blinked. "Why're you dressed like that? What're you doing here? Working for Team Rocket?"

"Work, work, work, that's all you ever think about." Will ran two fingers over Xatu's wing. "We're here to have a little fun."

"Karen," Ivy said, ignoring Will. "Please, what's going on?" She eyed Malik's corpse at her feet, still warm and bleeding.

Karen smiled that half-smile she had that held secrets just out of reach. "Oh, Ivy. I really did have high hopes for you. What a shame."

She and Will both selected a couple Pokéballs from their belts and tossed them out. Karen's Houndoom, a hellhound whose fur was riddled with old scars and had suffered a broken horn, narrowed dark eyes at Ivy's Houndoom and growled menacingly. It was joined by her Umbreon, larger and older than Ivy's Umbreon, and Will's Hypno and Starmie. Ivy took a careful step back, but there was little room to breathe with the fighting still going on around and above her. An errant Flamethrower from a swooping Charizard touched down on the ground nearby and melted the rock around what remained of Malik's body. His hair caught fire, and it slowly spread to consumer his face and chest.

"Yes, pity," Will said. "But Lance's orders were pretty clear."

Ivy paled. "Lance."

"Our boss from day one," Karen said. "You really didn't see this coming, did you? Honestly, Ivy, I thought I trained you better than

that."

Ivy's hands shook as she fumbled for the Pokéballs at her belt. Tyranitar lowered its head to her eye level and curled back its lips to reveal thick rows of sharp teeth. "You were working with the Elite Four all this time."

Will rolled his eyes. "Yes, *obviously*. And now that we've been promoted, we don't have to pander to that megalomaniac Giovanni." He screwed up his eyes and jerked his head to the side abruptly, as though having a seizure, and suddenly Starmie's jewel unleashed a Psychic attack that swept into Ivy and her Pokémon with the force of a tidal wave.

Ivy crumpled onto the ground, shaking and blinking the stars from her eyes, but aside from the stun of feeling a Psychic power that outclassed even Sabrina's, she was physically okay. Tyranitar crouched over her on all fours, its green scales dripping with dark energy, while Houndoom stood just to the side, hackles raised and tongue lolling with boiling drool. Umbreon and Wigglytuff were out of their Pokéballs and they flanked Houndoom, alert to the threat standing before them.

Ivy struggled on her quaking hands but managed to glare up at Will and Karen. "You did train me better," she spat. "I'm better than *you*, and I'm gonna destroy you for this."

Tyranitar roared, and the very earth trembled in fear before it. A flash of hesitation in Karen's eyes was all the encouragement Ivy needed to stand up.

"Dark Pulse!"

Shadows erupted all around her, and she jumped forward with her Pokémon, blades drawn.

23. Cinnabar Island, Part 3

Triumvirate, chapter 23: Cinnabar Island, Part 3
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Karen's Houndoom leaped in front of Hypno and Starmie and absorbed part of the triple Dark Pulse Ivy's Pokémon had conjured. Honchkrow and Xatu took to the sky, while Wigglytuff stayed close to Ivy behind Tyranitar. A knife in each hand, Ivy stayed low and shifted her gaze between Will and Karen, their Pokémon, and the birds circling overhead. It was too much to juggle at once, but she had to try.

"Earthquake!"

Tyranitar slammed its fists into the ground, which came apart under its weight. Rock spires shot up and chased down Houndoom and the two Psychics it was protecting, forcing them to flee. Hypno was launched into the air after taking a glancing blow from a chunk of rock and spun. Starmie glowed blue and caught Hypno mid fall, safely lowering it to the ground. Will remained silent and retreated to safety, commanding his Pokémon from a distance telepathically out of the path of danger.

Karen, however, had no such qualms. She unravelled the rubber lash at her hip and snapped it on the ground, cutting through a chunk of rock.

"You can't get to Will as long as I'm here," she said, eyes narrowed.

"Yeah, well, his Psychics can't even touch me! Fire Blast!"

Houndoom howled and spewed blue fire directly at Will, but Starmie launched into the air and spun rapidly. The blue fire stopped just short of it and arced back around toward Houndoom, propelled by telekinesis. Ivy gasped and sprinted out of the way. She tripped over the uneven ground Tyranitar had chewed up with its Earthquake attack and rolled. A whistling sound closed in on her, but Wigglytuff super-inflated and absorbed Karen's whip with its girth. An angry, red welt bloomed along Wigglytuff's fur where the lash connected, but the pink rabbit flattened its ears and began to shrink back to normal size.

"Moonblast!"

With a roll, Wigglytuff launched into the air and fired off a pale pink

shaft of dazzling light even before it fully regained its normal size. The attack raced toward Karen herself, but Karen's Umbreon leaped in front of it and rippled with dark energy. The Moonblast hit the scrappy feline hard, though, and it yelped in pain as it crashed into its trainer. Karen caught Umbreon, and they skidded on the ground together.

"No," she said, a spike of trepidation in her voice.

Umbreon was smoking, its fur matted with blood where the Fairy attack had pummeled it. But true to its reputation, Umbreon struggled to its feet, yellow eyes dilated in pain but still ready to fight as it struggled to breathe.

"That looked like it hurt," Will teased. "Though I can't imagine why a Fairy would want anything to do with the likes of you, Ivy."

"Guess I just have a sparkling personality," she bit out.

Karen recalled her Umbreon, unwilling to risk its life, and tossed out her final Pokéball. A squat Vileplume coalesced amidst the light. Its flower crown was so deeply red it was nearly black, and the petals curled as though rotted at the edges.

"You'll regret that," Karen said softly.

"We'll see about that. Hyper Beam!"

Tyranitar came down on all fours and blasted the battlefield, sweeping it in a ninety-degree arc. Above, Honchkrow took advantage of the chaos and swooped in with a Night Slash. Houndoom saw it before Ivy and dashed to intervene, but Honchkrow was faster. Super-hardened wings struck Ivy in the back and knocked her off her feet just as she pulled herself upright. Dark, malevolent energy swept over her, paralyzing in its effects, but it was the impact that hurt the most. Her head snapped forward and she hit the ground face first. Pain erupted in her right temple, where the earth bit into her face and the side of her head. Her back screamed in pain despite the armor protecting it, which now bore a deep gash that nearly cut to the soft, mesh under armor beneath it. Her knives slipped out of her grip and scattered out of reach.

Houndoom was at her side in a flash, blasting the fleeing Honchkrow with Flamethrowers as it hovered protectively over her. Will burst out laughing, and he tossed out another Pokéball. A small, rotund Wynaut plopped onto the ground and looked around through its slitted eyes.

Will bent down and picked it up with a pat to the head.

"Oh Ivy, giving up already?" he taunted. "But we're just getting started."

He glanced up at Xatu, who was still circling, and smiled. The bird's dark eyes glowed blue as it peered into the future and foresaw an attack.

Ivy pushed herself up on quaking limbs. Blood leaked down the right side of her face where the area around her eyes was cut up and fast turning purple. Her face throbbed, the bones likely broken in multiple places. It hurt to blink, and her vision in her right eye swam. She spared Will's Wynaut a cursory glance, baffled as to why he would bring such a weak Pokémon to a fight like this.

Umbreon, Houndoom, Tyranitar, and a battered Wigglytuff huddled around Ivy in a wall.

"You're all alone, Ivy," Karen said. "Not even Marco will come to help you now."

"Marco," Ivy said, stunned. "What're you talking about?"

"Strange thing, family," Will said. "I've *never* understood what the big deal is."

"Family? What happened to Marco? Tell me!" Ivy demanded.

"You chose this," Karen went on. Her Houndoom and Vileplume flanked her, ready to attack at a moment's notice. "You could've stayed with us, but you threw us away. As far as I'm concerned, you deserve whatever happens to you now. And you'll suffer it alone." She held out her hand. "Finish her."

Houndoom and Vileplume quivered with pent up energy. The ensuing Fire Blast and Solar Beam attacks merged into one massive light shaft and tore up the earth in its path. Tyranitar hunkered down, dark energy sluicing down its plated scales like water and ready to catch the attack. A phantom wind swept Ivy from behind and washed over her Pokémon harmlessly all of a sudden and collided with Karen's fused attack. As though they had hit an invisible wall, the Fire Blast and Solar Beam exploded in all directions except forward, sparing Tyranitar entirely.

A familiar squawk preceded beating wings that kicked up a small gale

and forced Ivy to shield her eyes.

"She's not alone."

Ivy looked up from her spot slumped on the ground just in time to see Gary recall Aerodactyl and release Espeon and Scizor. Alakazam stood at his right, hollow eyes narrowed at Will and his Psychics, silent.

"Gary!" Ivy struggled to stand, and he reached for her. She leaned her weight against him and fancied that her back didn't hurt so bad with his arm around it. She didn't realize she was trembling until he tightened his hand around hers.

"A Clairvoyant Oak," Will mused, patting Wynaut's head. "Now *why* does this feel so familiar?"

Gary bared his teeth in a snarl. "Where's my gramps? He went to Indigo Plateau looking for the Elite Four."

"He found them," Karen said.

"Gary," Ivy whispered. "That's Will and Karen, the ones I told you about before."

Hypno and Starmie advanced suddenly, and Umbreon jumped in front of Tyranitar to confront them, tiny fangs bared and yellow rings glowing in the moonlight. The tiny Wynaut jumped from Will's arms and waddled in between the larger Psychics, unafraid. Umbreon hissed, and Ivy's Houndoom padded forward, growling.

"I don't care who they are. Where's my gramps? I'm not gonna ask you again," Gary said.

Will burst out laughing again and clutched his stomach. "God you're dull. Ivy, of all the Clairvoyants in the world, you just had to pick up *this* one? At least the old man had some spunk."

Ivy ignored Will and kept an eye on Karen, who was slowly moving closer. She was four feet closer than she'd been when Gary arrived, though Ivy was sure she hadn't noticed the older woman move much at all. Panic fluttered in her chest, and she forced herself to stand up on her own.

"Stop," Ivy said, holding an arm out in front of her. "Not another step."

Karen watched her with a half smile that held secrets, one Ivy knew

too well. Karen's Houndoom hovered at her side, tongue lolling and dark eyes hungry. She took another step forward. "Too late."

Before either Ivy or Gary could react, Wynaut opened its slitted eyes and lunged at Umbreon. The black feline, never one to back down from a challenge, hissed and slashed at the ungainly Psychic, swatting it away and leaving a scratch in its belly. Next to Gary, Alakazam and Espeon shuddered, and Gary himself gasped.

"No, wait!"

In the split second that followed, Karen cracked her whip on the ground in front of Ivy's Pokémon, startling them, and her Houndoom lunged. But the scarred hellhound's target was not Ivy or Gary. Wynaut shrieked as Houndoom leaped on top of it and tore into its blue, rubbery flesh with Fire Fang. Before Ivy had a chance to be shocked, her Umbreon contorted in pain and crumpled to the ground.

"Scizor!" Gary cried out.

Scizor sped toward Karen's Houndoom, steel-coated pincers raised for a swift U-Turn attack, but Houndoom coughed up black and orange fire and burned the ground in front of it. Scizor skidded to a halt, wary of the flames.

"Umbreon!" Ivy ran past Tyranitar and fell on her knees over her convulsing Pokémon. "Umbreon, what's happening?"

Before her eyes, deep puncture wounds appeared around Umbreon's belly in half-moon patterns. Teeth marks. They began to smoke, and the blood that leaked from them boiled and turned to red mist that stung Ivy's throat and eyes. Careless of whatever curse had taken hold of Umbreon, Ivy ran her hands over the feline's body as unseen forces mangled it before her eyes.

"Curious little things, Wynaut," Will said. "They're completely useless in a fight in the traditional sense. In fact, Magikarp pack more of a punch than them. Why, then, aren't Wynaut hunted to extinction?" He grinned, but there was no joy reflected in his eyes. "Don't bother guessing, I'll tell you. See, Wynaut has a charming little defense mechanism that practically guarantees its safety." He crouched down to a squatting position to be at eye-level with Ivy, and she felt his gaze on her. "Destiny Bond forces the cursed predator to suffer the same fate as its hapless prey. And since Wynaut does exactly as I say, well, in a way it's almost cheating. But rules are just so *boring*."

Ivy met his gaze, horror-stricken as she understood his meaning. Will's eyes softened and he smiled brightly.

"There. That look in your eyes? That's anything *but* boring."

Karen looked on, her pretty face a mask of cold indifference. "Crunch."

"No!" Ivy screamed.

Karen's Houndoom bit down on Wynaut's broken body and snapped its spine, ending the poor Pokémon's suffering. Under her hands, Umbreon convulsed as though electrocuted and bent strangely out of shape. The *crack* of bones breaking thundered in Ivy's ears, and she fell on top of Umbreon.

"No, no!" she wailed.

She clutched Umbreon in her shaking arms, tears blurring its form to a black and yellow smear in her vision, and held it tight. Sobs racked her body and stoked the ache in her back and face where Honchkrow's earlier attack had caught her unawares. Umbreon was limp in her arms.

Karen's Houndoom dropped Wynaut's corpse, hardly recognizable, and turned up its nose to the free meal. It padded back toward Karen and Vileplume and earned a pat on the head.

Ivy continued to sob and stroke Umbreon's matted fur, searching for the light in its glazed, yellow eyes that wasn't there anymore. "Please," she whispered, "please, don't go."

Tyranitar, Houndoom, and Wigglytuff gathered around her, wary of the enemy but drawn by her sobs. Houndoom whined and nudged Umbreon's distorted back gently.

Ivy's tears beaded on Umbreon's fur, little dewdrops that caught the moonlight. Her whole body became heavier the longer she stayed on the ground, clutching the first Pokémon she'd ever raised to maturity, the first living thing that had ever loved her enough to get stronger for her.

"*I want an Umbreon like yours, then we can fight together."*

"*Then I'll tell you a secret."* Karen had leaned in close and cupped her cheek lightly, still plump with baby fat in her mere eleven years.

"Make it love you enough to die for you." Karen's voice in the present echoed the secret she'd imparted to Ivy all those years ago. "In the end, maybe you aren't a complete disappointment. You managed to raise a perfect Umbreon."

Footsteps walked around Ivy. Gary, flanked by Espeon and Alakazam, towered over her in that moment against the impossible gravity that weighed her down. All around, the war continued to rage as fires broke out and steel sang.

"Ivy," he said.

She clutched Umbreon's corpse to her chest and looked up at Gary through watery eyes, but he was little more than a blur. Still, the brilliant green of his eyes shone through the darkness and caught the starlight. But he wasn't looking at her.

"You were right," he went on. "I'm not like Sabrina because I have you." He held out his hand to her. "And you're not like them. You never were."

Will doubled over laughing. "Oh, Karen! Just *listen* to him!"

Karen said nothing, but her eyes traveled skyward and narrowed at nothing. Xatu circled overhead with Honchkrow, eyes aglow.

"Ivy," Gary repeated.

The sky opened up behind them as energy materialized out of nowhere and ripped a hole in it. A vortex of telekinetic energy spilled into the night, and Espeon and Alakazam braced themselves while Wigglytuff huddled at Tyranitar's feet.

"Ivy!"

It was the hardest thing she ever did, letting Umbreon fall so she could take his hand. But she groped for him against the pain, and he lifted her up. Future Sight hit them with the force of an avalanche, but Gary squeezed her hand in his.

The first time Ivy ever feared death was in the Masked Man's dark, damp cell, a lonely place where not even the sun would know of her passing. Only him and those pale, white eyes that stole whatever light dared visit her. It was also the last time she'd ever feared death.

"*The night isn't so scary when the things that go bump are on your side."*

Karen's face washed out in the light that swept over Ivy and Gary, but his hand remained firm in hers through it all.

"*I trust you with everything."*

"Tyranitar!" she screamed through the void.

Like flesh drawn taut to the point of bursting, the artificial light ripped apart down the middle and darkness flooded through. Ivy greeted it like an old friend with an open embrace, unafraid as she held onto Gary. An ear-splitting roar cut through the white noise, and suddenly the present caught up to the future. The Future Sight attack dissipated, giving way once more to night and the moon and stars above. Tyranitar towered over Ivy from behind and emanated dark smoke from its scales, the corners of its eyes, in between rows of sharp teeth. It had deflected the Future Sight completely, unmoved. Will and Karen glared from behind the safety of their Pokémon's Light Screens. And Gary's hand in Ivy's pulsed with warmth.

"You," Will spat, eyes narrowed to slits at Gary and revealing a little of the fury he'd kept so well hidden up until now. "You're as mad as Sabrina!"

The pain in Ivy's back had dulled to a manageable level, and Umbreon's body lay in a heap at her feet. She looked to her left and nearly jumped in surprise and a little fear. Gary's eyes had faded to white, zombie-like, and he hovered a couple inches off the ground, slowly rising. Alakazam and Espeon bore similarly vacuous eyes, hackles raised. Ivy nearly choked on her own breath. The air around them was thick and shimmered.

"Miracle Eye," Ivy gasped. "Gary, you did it."

His hand squeezed hers, and she got the eerie sensation that he was looking at her askance.

"Together," he said in a thousand voices as old as the ages, men's and women's, familiar and strange.

She had a sudden flashback to Sabrina, how she'd risen up like an exorcised demon and done the impossible, nearly killing Tyranitar and Ivy herself in the process. He was the same, yet different somehow. But be it Gary or Sabrina, there were bigger monsters to deal with now.

Ivy blinked through the last of her tears and leveled every ounce of

hatred and anger she had at Will and Karen. Houndoom and Wigglytuff huddled at her sides, while Tyranitar snarled behind her.

"Yeah," she said, letting go of his hand and drawing a knife from a holster across the small of her back. "Together."

Karen readied her whip, while Will backed up to let his Pokémon do the fighting. Ivy sniffled, the last of her tears drying on her cheeks, and sprinted forward alongside Houndoom.

Ash had felt death's chilling touch before in the bowels of Mt. Moon, in the epicenter of Surge's fabricated thunderstorm, among the living and the dead and the Ghosts that lurked in between. But never had he felt it quite like this, a sentient thing embodied in the hands of a woman whose eyes reflected nothing but the inevitability of that which awaits all living things.

"Ice Beam."

Jynx and Lorelei's recently released Lapras skated upon the iced deck and fired a set of twin ice bolts that zeroed in on Ash and his Pokémon. Snorlax dug its chipped nails into the thin sheen of ice covering the deck and let loose a Hyper Beam that collided with Lapras's attack with a whistling *crack*. The two energy beams exploded and released ice shards that shot out in all directions and impaled anything that got in their way. Ash leaped out of the path of Jynx's Ice Beam just in time to snap at Charizard.

"Blast Burn!"

The great pseudo-Dragon erupted in flames and spat out a thick column of fire at the incoming Ice Beam. Jynx glowed blue with Confusion and lifted into the air, taking Lorelei with her, just as the Blast Burn hurtled across the deck and melted through ice and iron until it hit the opposite side and dissipated in a tuft of black, putrid smoke.

"If you won't stay on the ground, then I'll simply come to you!"

Lorelei, propelled by Jynx's Psychic powers, shot through the air toward Ash as he fell back to the deck from some thirty feet in the air. Charizard took off and flew toward Ash, but Lorelei expected this.

"Hydro Pump!"

Lapras glided across the icy deck and spewed a jet of water at Charizard, forcing the orange lizard to veer off course and redirect its attention. Pikachu leaped from its shoulders and fired off a powerful Thunderbolt at Lapras, but the bulky Pokémon was fast and graceful on the ice and narrowly avoided the attack. Water washed across the deck and froze on contact, and Pikachu's attack cut a jagged crag about five yards in length through it. Night had fallen, but the ship's floodlights and Gengar's spectral Aura enabled Ash's vision, and he tracked Lorelei's movements through the darkness.

"Shadow Ball!"

Gengar rose from Ash's shoulders, took a deep breath, and hurled a shadowy sphere at Lorelei that followed her like a homing missile. In mid-air and without her basic motor controls, Lorelei faltered, but Jynx intervened and threw itself in front of its trainer. The Shadow Ball hit it in the stomach, and Jynx screamed like a banshee and shuddered. Lorelei's aura faded and she fell to the deck, but Lapras caught her on its back and slid to safety as she reached for the remaining two Pokéballs at her belt. Jynx absorbed the Shadow Ball and drifted back to the deck, trembling. A layer of frost coated its body, and its hair froze in places.

"You don't fight like the average trainer," Lorelei commented, almost curious. "But neither do I."

She tossed out her remaining Pokéballs, and a Dewgong and a Cloyster, both twice her size, landed on deck with a *thud.* Ash fell back to solid ground and nearly lost his footing on the slippery ice. Pikachu scampered to his side and Charizard and Snorlax gathered around him, teeth bared and breath misting in the sheer cold.

It *was* cold, he realized. Far too cold for this time of year, barely autumn, and yet he shivered despite himself. He'd never faced a Crystallos before, and he wondered if this was Lorelei's doing.

As if sensing his thoughts, her lips curled in what could have passed for a smirk on anyone else. "Diamond Dust."

Before Ash could ponder what that meant, Cloyster clamped up and and spun rapidly, releasing deadly sharp spikes from its chipped shell. Dewgong opened its mouth and exhaled a gale of Icy Wind that caught up to the flying spikes and froze them solid, elongating them up to a foot in length. They tapered at the ends to impossibly sharp points, and all of a sudden a barrage of icicles longer and thicker

around than Ash's arm were hurtling straight for him.

"Shit, Charizard!"

Charizard spread its wings and fired up a superheated Fire Blast while Ash grabbed Pikachu and leaped to safety, but Snorlax was too far away and exposed to the attack. Ash reached for the big bear, his fear for its safety spurring Gengar into action. The Ghost grew to an immense size and swooped toward Snorlax, but the ice spikes were too fast. Two ripped into the sides of Snorlax's fatty belly and drew weeping gashes in its fur. The bear roared in pain and Ash screamed, but a veil of darkness fell before his eyes and sucked the rest of the ice spikes into its shadowy depths. Momentarily blind to his Pokémon, Ash floated to the ground and tried to run to it, slipping on the ice as tears blurred his eyes.

The side of Ash's head throbbed where the crossbow had nicked him, but he ignored it as he desperately ran toward Snorlax. Visions of the day he'd found Munchlax, just a fat little ball of fluff alone and crying in the woods returned to him. The fury and pain he'd felt just looking upon it, remembering what its parents can done to his and unable to exact revenge. Munchlax had been so afraid then, so alone until Ash found it.

"No!" he screamed as he dove into the roiling, black shadows that concealed Snorlax.

But when he collided with a body that was far too small and spindly to belong to Snorlax, he tensed and looked up through the gloom. Small, bony hands gripped him by the arms, and a pair of glowing, violet eyes peered down at him over a hooked nose, eternally disappointed.

"Pull yourself together, boy. I thought I made it clear I expected you to be a fully realized Medium the next time we crossed paths."

Tears of desperation turned to shock and, unbelievably, joy as Ash found himself staring up into Agatha's wrinkled face, severe and dour as ever. She wrenched away from him and brushed herself off, shedding scintillating ice crystals from her clothes with each shake. Ash stood up to his full height, now several inches taller than her, and burst into a teary but brilliant smile.

"Agatha!"

Behind her, Snorlax groaned and lurched onto its hind legs. Aside

from the initial two lacerations it had suffered, it was unscathed. The wounds were flesh wounds, not too deep to deter the big bear. Beady eyes focused on Ash, and it lumbered toward him, dripping blood as it went. It nudged him with its moist snout and grumbled low in its belly, sniffing him for signs of injury. Ash laughed and hugged Snorlax's thick head, barely able to close his arms around its wide neck.

"Impossible," Lorelei said, her voice breathy with disbelief. "You can't be here, not now."

The shadows that enveloped Agatha and Ash receded, and it was then that he heard the telltale Ghost cackles within them. Mismagius coalesced just inches from Ash's face and grinned her tar-filled, toothless grin from beneath her wide-brimmed hat. Two Gengar held hands and swayed over Agatha's shoulders, powering her Aura.

"What's the matter, Lorelei?" Agatha said. "You look like you've seen a Ghost."

Surrounded by her four Pokémon, Lorelei frosted over and glared at Agatha. "You couldn't have escaped on your own."

"Agatha," Ash said. "Professor Oak went to find you."

"Ah, he found me, all right."

"So he's here!"

Agatha spared Ash a glance, and he didn't miss the turbulence in her violet eyes. "It's not what you think. Sam, he—"

A thunderous *crack* cut her off, and the two of them were forced to jump to safety as an Ice Beam attack struck the deck where they'd been standing. Snorlax roared and stamped its feet on deck, its monstrous weight shaking the whole ship and cracking the ice underfoot.

"Hyper Beam!" Ash barked.

Snorlax's belly swelled as it powered up, and Agatha took off directly toward Lorelei. Cloyster launched a renewed hail of spikes at her and Dewgong froze them with another blast of of Icy Wind, but Agatha's Ghosts surrounded her in a thick veil that disintegrated the icicles on contact, raining fine crystals all over the deck that sparkled in the moonlight. Ash waved to Charizard, who'd taken to the skies with

Pikachu on its back and now swooped around again.

Snorlax lurched forward unexpectedly, and when it fired of its Hyper Beam attack not at Lorelei but at her Pokémon, Ash almost smiled. Dewgong slid to safety over the ice, but Cloyster was a bulky mess and far too slow. It clamped shut just as the Hyper Beam slammed into it, and the force of the attack sent it crashing into the wall. Metal whined and dented before tearing completely, and Cloyster hurtled through the covered entrance to the galley below deck, stopping only when it flew through the opposite wall and skidded out back toward the port railing. Its spiky shell was cracked and missing pieces when it came out the other end, and slimy brine leaked from the cracks. It didn't move from its final resting spot.

Lorelei, still on Lapras's back, waved a hand toward Agatha, completely ignoring Cloyster's demise. "Ice Beam!"

Jynx rose into the air with its telekinetic powers and raised both hands. Each fired off sustained bolts of ice that twisted in savage arcs after Agatha as she closed in. The two Gengar cackled maniacally as they bounced the frigid energy off each other, barely grazing it and keeping Agatha safe.

"How *dare* you!" Agatha bellowed.

Mismagius leaped from Agatha's chest and spread its billowy arms in a ghastly embrace that reached fifteen feet across and descended on Jynx. The humanoid Pokémon screamed and tried to release a frosty gale to repel the Ghost, but Mismagius opened its maw to twice the length of its body and bit down on Jynx. The two Pokémon crashed into the deck in a wash of black fog. The smell of rot took to the air like a plague, and the ice underfoot flaked, grey. The echo of Jynx's scream reverberated on deck, but from within the sea of shadows, nothing rose.

Lorelei stood up on the shell of Lapras's back, her Dewgong and Cloyster flocking to her. Agatha reached for her, Ghostly Aura honed to scythe-like talons over her fingers. But instead of running, Lorelei reached to meet her.

"Body Slam!" she shouted.

Dewgong leaped into the air toward Agatha, and the two Gengar veered her to the side to avoid the worst of the attack. It was her undoing, and for the first time in their battle, Lorelei bared her too-white teeth in a grin. Her gloved fingers closed around Agatha's wrist,

careless of the specter's touch that blackened her armor and the skin underneath. Lorelei threw them both onto the icy deck, where the two women skidded over the slick surface. Agatha cried out in agony, but Lorelei didn't let her go. From his vantage where he'd landed, Ash's heart nearly burst out of his chest at the sudden thought that Agatha was dead. He'd never heard anyone wail like that before.

"You think you're invincible against me?" Lorelei spat as she held Agatha down on the deck. "You *really* don't learn your lesson, do you?"

She got to her feet and tossed Agatha aside, clutching her arm where she'd grabbed onto the old woman. It hung limp at her side as the armor turned black, but Lorelei didn't seem concerned with it. Agatha, on the other hand, barely had the strength to sit up. Relief rushed down Ash's spine when he saw that she was alive, though wounded. But that small consolation evaporated when he saw the state of her arm.

It was blackened and covered with frostlings, frozen solid.

No way, Ash thought to himself. *She froze Agatha just with her touch?*

Lorelei towered over Agatha.

"You're the f-foolish one," Agatha said, teeth chattering with cold. "I l-loved you like a daughter."

Lorelei betrayed nothing of her true feelings. "Oh, Agatha. You loved me like a doll you could dress up and parade about. You had no children of your own, so you turned someone else's into your pet project. That is, until you lost interest and cast me aside for a shiny, new model." She glanced back at Ash. "You greedy old hag. You just can't stop, can you? You never will."

Agatha's two Gengar had receded into her as the frostbite spread up her arm slowly. Mismagius gradually reclaimed its shape a short distance away, the rotted skull hidden among the folds of its shadowy body still crunching on Jynx's remains.

Lorelei turned back to Agatha and sneered down at her. "But you know how it goes with monsters and their creators. Even you can't live forever."

Without warning or hesitation, Lorelei brought her booted foot down on Agatha's blackened arm with all her might and shattered it. Agatha howled, a wretched sound of a dying animal joined by the cries of her

Gengar, and slumped on the ice. Shards of her arm, black and red with frozen blood, scattered across the ice.

Ash's throat clenched up so tightly he couldn't breathe, but his legs moved regardless. They launched him high into the air just as Charizard made its way back to the deck. Lorelei saw him coming, though, and turned on her heel, drawing a slushy, red stain on the ice in Agatha's crystallized blood.

"Sheer Cold," she commanded softly.

Lapras threw its head back and spewed a wispy, opalescent breath of air that grew quickly and washed over the deck area in front of it. Ash fell toward the deck, unable to avoid the sea of cold below. Fear and fury loosened his throat as he stared death in the face like a tired old friend come to meet him yet again, he'd lost count of their many past acquaintances. The cold sucked him under by the ankles and clawed its way into him, past his armor and clothes and under his skin. It burrowed under his fingernails like sharpened bamboo, grated his muscles to a cheesy pulp, and drowned him with his last breath.

"Charizard," he rasped as he landed lightly on the frozen deck.

Gengar's Aura remained around him, a second skin frozen in time and helpless against the sub-zero temperatures. Agatha's futile screaming drifted to him from a place far, far away, like being underwater or in a dream. The burn reminded him of the aberrant Rhydon he'd faced so long ago, his first death by fire. In the end, fire or ice, it was the same. His eyes, unable to blink, itched with tears that had frozen before they could form. And Lorelei, ever frigid, strolled toward him, oblivious to the cold. Frost kissed her skin and drew little fernlings along her temples. They sparkled in the moonlight, beautiful and dead.

Gengar's whispers were slowly falling silent in Ash's head even though the Ghost's veil remained. Could Ghosts die a second time? He wondered as Gengar's anguish merged with his and froze the blood in his veins. With every passing second, he forgot what it felt like to be warm.

"*There's death in your bones."*

It was eating away at his bones now.

"Be happy," Lorelei said as she approached, one foot leaving red smudges with every step. "You'll be free of the Medium's curse and die today with the ones you love."

But he wasn't dead, not yet. And if death wanted to fuck with him again today, he'd put on a show they'd remember for a long time to come.

Frost caked his lips, but he forced them apart just enough to suck in the frozen air, barely air at all. "Burn in hell."

Lorelei narrowed her eyes at him and raised her good hand toward him, dusted with frost. The refrigerated air around them began to shift, and a beating like distant drums rumbled louder and louder. Lorelei hesitated and her gaze flickered to somewhere behind Ash. Her white-blue eyes widened in disbelief, then genuine fear. The heat hit Ash in the back and sent him flying as fire curled around his body, under and around his arms and legs, swallowing him whole and Lorelei, too. Her mouth twisted in a scream as she fell backward toward Lapras and Dewgong, but the fire was faster. A snarling roar was all Ash heard as his vision filled with orange light. He snapped his eyes shut and let the fire carry him, limbs like jelly and useless as they tumbled with him across the deck.

The floor shook all around him as something landed on top of him. Charizard, still leaking fire from the Blast Burn attack, hovered over him on all fours and roared. Pikachu squeaked from its perch on Charizard's head, safe from the heat, and jumped down to join Ash. He coughed, throat on fire, and managed to stretch his head back to see behind him. Lorelei, what was left of her, lay in a smoking, charred heap on a bed of twisted metal melted and then frozen again all in the course of a couple seconds. Her mouth was wrenched open in a scream, but her lips crumbled to ashes in the wind. Dewgong and Lapras, also charred and bleeding, scrambled to the other side of the deck and jumped into the water.

Slowly, Gengar's Aura receded and the Ghost retreated within Ash, dormant and completely spent. The cold hit Ash first as the crunched ice beneath him bit into his skin through his armor, but Charizard's head melted it quickly and radiated over Ash. Tears filled his eyes, and despite the rawness in his throat and body that felt like someone had drawn a rake over his bare flesh, he laughed. A pitiful, choking sound, but a laugh nonetheless. Pikachu climbed onto his chest and Charizard backed up a little, yellow eyes slitted as it tilted its head to see him better.

Ash reached a weak hand toward the pseudo-Dragon, shaking, and unbelievably, Charizard met him halfway with its nose and bumped his palm.

"You big s-softy," he rasped, smiling through cracked, bleeding lips as he recalled Lily's teasing. "You r-really do care."

Snorlax lumbered over to the group and shook out its fur. Ice and snow rained down on Charizard, Ash, and Pikachu, the former of whom rose up on its hind legs and snarled. Snorlax, more than twice Charizard's size, ignored the threat and plopped down on its rear, shaking the entire deck.

"Snorlax," Ash said, choking on another laugh. "Talk about th-thick skin."

Pikachu crawled over Ash's chest and licked the half-melted frost and blood from his chin and cheeks. Fresh tears fell as he took a moment to just lie there.

I'm alive.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, soft whispers echoed in his ear, barely there, and he smiled.

Thanks, Gengar. You did good.

"Charizard, help me up."

Charizard glared down at him as if to say, 'Haven't I done enough for you today?' But it nevertheless lowered its head so Ash could grab hold of one of its horns and be pulled up. He reached out with his free arm and clenched a fist in Snorlax's fur. His legs were jelly and quaked under his weight, and Pikachu skittered around between his feet, anxious as he tried to remember what it felt like to stand up. His red eyes alighted by chance on Charizard's left leg, which was still black in patches with frostbite from Jynx's Ice Beam, and a wave of anger nearly knocked him back on the ground. But he held onto his Pokémon, and they didn't let him fall.

The feeling slowly returned to his legs, and he vaguely wondered what the standard medical procedure was for being frozen solid, then getting burned to a crisp while a Ghost kept you alive through it all. A problem for later that Lily would undoubtedly have an opinion on, he decided.

"Agatha."

She was slumped on the deck, shaking. Mismagius had crawled to her side and fused with her, a trail of Jynx's blood in its wake as though

someone had dragged a butchered body across the deck. Agatha's eyes were closed and her forehead was clammy as the Ghost lent her its strength. Ash clenched his teeth.

"Charizard, help me get over there."

With one shaking hand, he recalled Snorlax to its Pokéball to rest its wounds. Charizard made its way toward Agatha with Ash hanging onto its horn, step by step, ice melting underfoot as it progressed. They passed by Lorelei's charred remains, hardly recognizable as they crumbled over the warped iron deck. Ash looked away and focused on Agatha.

Soon, Charizard succeeded in dragging him to her, and he thought he could limp a little on his own. Testing his theory, he shifted more weight to his legs and balanced on Charizard's horn while Pikachu blinked up at him, wary. Weight on his foot sent stabbing pain up his toes through his calves, and he hissed. Determined, he shifted the weight between his feet, swallowing the pain a little more with each alternating shift. Agatha opened her eyes, cloaked in violet, and peered up at him.

"Ash," she managed.

"Agatha." He kneeled down on the deck and leaned toward her. "You okay?"

She cast him a withering look that made him wince despite her obvious suffering. "Still alive, I suppose."

His gaze drifted from her face to her left arm, which was shattered just past her elbow. The sawed off end was black and beginning to thaw. Slushy, reddish-brown goo dripped from the stump. The stench made his eyes water, but he forced himself not to look away.

"We need to get you to the hospital." He tried not to let his voice waver.

Agatha's laugh was a raspy, unpleasant sound like her tongue was made of sandpaper. "And do what? Mismagius is already taking care of it."

Her spectral Aura pulsed like a heartbeat and shadowed the stump in violet, putrid mist. The stump continued to thaw, but it didn't bleed further.

"...Still. For the pain, at least."

Agatha's gaze was far away. "Pain reminds us of the price we paid to stay alive, and I've paid one much too steep. I'd like to remember it."

The sounds of the war continued in the distance inland, and Ash spared the coast a glance. Gary and Ivy and Lily were all fighting out there somewhere, and they were facing other members of the Elite Four. He had to help them.

"C'mon." He slung Agatha's good arm around his shoulder and leveraged their weight with his grip on Charizard's horn. "We gotta get off this ship."

Agatha shuddered as he lifted her, and he grunted in pain despite Mismagius's presence cloaking her. "My left pocket. Release the Pokéball."

Ash did as he was told, and in a flourish of light Pidgeot materialized on deck with a startled squawk. It took him a moment, but Ash recognized the scar on Pidgeot's neck from a fight it had gotten into as a Pidgeotto many years ago against a wild Fearow on Route One.

"That's Professor Oak's Pidgeot," he said, stunned. "But then, where's...?"

Agatha stood a rattling breath, and suddenly Ash remembered just how old she was. Frail and nearly weightless in his grip, she could have floated away on a strong wind just then. "He's dead, Ash. The Elite Four stopped us trying to escape Indigo Plateau."

Ash froze, unsure he'd heard her right. "Did... But wait, he..." He shook his head. "No, no he can't be. Did you see it? Did you see it happen?"

"Ash."

He turned her around so he could look her in the eye. "Did you see it? Was there... Was there a body? 'Cause if not, then you don't know for sure—"

"Ash," she said more forcefully. "That's enough. Please..."

He blinked once, twice, faster and faster, but the tears fell anyway. Agatha had never looked so old and tired than she did in that moment. They stood there for a few moments, he wasn't sure how long.

"Get on," he said softly, voice trembling as he led her toward Pidgeot and did his best to give her a leg up. "We have to get you to a hospital."

Agatha said nothing, and Ash limped to Charizard's side and struggled to pull himself up over the screaming pain in his joints. Pikachu hopped into his lap, and he nearly passed out right there. Charizard huffed, and Pidgeot shifted its weight between its taloned feet nervously, eyeing the overgrown lizard.

"Let's go," he said.

Charizard lifted off into the night sky, and Oak's Pidgeot took off after it.

Ivy dashed and slashed without tire, her anger driving her. Gary could feel the air split under the drag of her blade as though it were a tangible thing. She lunged for Karen, but the woman's Houndoom and Honchkrow worked together to keep her at bay while Vileplume kept up a steady Petal Dance storm that deterred Tyranitar's advance.

Will, meanwhile, hung back and commanded his Psychics as a puppet master would command his strung up slaves. Starmie hurtled through the air in a Rapid Spin laced with Confusion toward Espeon, but on Gary's whim Scizor leaped to intervene and viciously knocked Starmie out of its trajectory with a well-timed X-Scissor. The jeweled starfish was hardy and resilient, and even Scizor's iron pincers were not enough to shatter the gem that pulsed like a heart and powered it. The two Pokémon faced off in silence save for Scizor's constant buzzing.

Hypno and Alakazam stared each other down as they engaged in a battle of wits. Neither moved so much as a muscle, but the air currents around them shifted like a rip tide as Psychic energy flowed out and around them, sharp as razor wind and searching for any weakness, no matter how small. Shining, yellow light shimmered around them as Safeguards materialized and disintegrated in the span of milliseconds.

But Karen was not content to leave her Clairvoyant partner to his devices. Her Houndoom loped around Hypno, kicking up fire in its wake, and made to intercept Alakazam with a Crunch attack. Its maw smoked with black fire as it readied its attack, but out of nowhere Espeon, coated in blue light, slammed into Houndoom's side with more force than its small body betrayed. Houndoom whined in pain and veered off course, but recovered quickly. Canine and feline faced

off, the latter still seeing white and shaking with barely restrained rage. Gary needed no telepathic connection to sense Espeon's grief over the loss of its kin.

"Psybeam," he said in voices he didn't recognize.

Espeon hissed and the jewel in its forehead unleashed a powerful shaft of light that hit Houndoom in the side and cut through a burgeoning Dark Pulse attack. Houndoom yelped as it took the full force of Espeon's attack, fur and muscle sloughing from its right flank in a bloody mess on the ground.

"Hyper Beam!" Ivy shouted.

Tyranitar powered up the attack, but Vileplume was ready to counteract with a Solar Beam that met the Hyper Beam with an explosive *crack* and rocked the battlefield for a fifty foot radius in all directions. Alakazam and Hypno lost their eye contact, and Alakazam wasted no time in powering up a Psychic attack. Honchkrow swooped in with a Night Slash attack in the commotion, hurtling straight for Alakazam's back, but the Psychic needed no eyes to see and unleashed its telekinetic assault in all directions. Honchkrow squawked in agony as the energy slammed into it and veered it off course. Black and white feathers fluttered to the ground as the bird took a nosedive and tumbled over itself. Xatu swooped in for the rescue, but Ivy was ready.

"Crunch!"

Her Houndoom leaped six feet in the air and snatched the bird just as it had brandished its talons for a Sky Attack. They clawed at Houndoom's neck and chest, drawing angry, red ribbons in its fur. The talons caught on the protruding bones, however, scraping fruitlessly as Houndoom bit down hard on the bird's right wing. Xatu squawked and glowed blue with Confusion, but Houndoom's dark energy silenced the bird's attempts to counterstrike and ripped it apart, feather from wing from torso in a rage.

Through it all, Gary struggled to maintain consciousness as his mind threatened to slip away from him and darkness lingered on all sides, ready to close in. Voices whispered in his head, voices that didn't belong to him. He heard Oak and Sabrina, and he heard others whose voices he didn't recognize. He heard Alakazam and Espeon, felt them rather, but there was no distinguishing thought from feeling from sound. It all blended together in a paroxysm of insanity that came and went as intensely as anger or love or sadness, deeply felt and branded

to his soul, however transient.

I'm going mad, he thought.

The unintelligible whispers squabbled in his head, and it was all he could do to maintain his focus on his Pokémon and keep them one step ahead of Will and Karen. To keep Ivy safe.

"Look at you! You don't even know what you're doing!" Will taunted from a safe distance.

Gary hovered over the ground and while he faced Will, he could see in 360 degrees all around him as though the sun were high in the sky despite the witching hour. He could see Espeon's Confusion cloak as it circled Karen's wounded Houndoom, how it leaped from the feline like sun flares, looking for an opening. Will himself shone bright white, almost indiscernible against the light save for his curling sneer and those dark, calculating eyes. Gary's vision doubled as the Miracle Eye threatened to overwhelm him.

"Didn't Sabrina tell you the secret's *not* to listen to the voices in your head?" Will said.

"Shut up!"

Will ignored him. "You at least got what you needed from her before you chopped off her head, right?"

"I didn't kill her!"

He blurted it out before he could help himself, the image still fresh in his mind as the day he'd stood by and watched Ivy saw Sabrina's head off. Guilt that wasn't his washed through him, and it was followed by a deep sadness. His focus shifted to Alakazam, but the Psychic maintained its efforts against Hypno.

"No, but you watched it happen, didn't you?" Will paused, putting two and two together. "It was Ivy, wasn't it? Of course it was. How dare you betray your own kind like that."

Nearby, Ivy ran past an exhausted Honchkrow to get to Karen, but Vileplume was ready with a Vine Whip that caught her by the ankle and threw her bodily backward. Tyranitar caught her with a grunt.

"It's not like that!" Gary said. "Sabrina got what was coming to her."

Starmie fired off a powerful Psychic attack at Scizor, but the red mantis was quick and leaped into the air over the energy wave. Its crimson pincers shone in the moonlight, hardening for a Metal Claw attack aimed at Starmie's jeweled heart. The starfish Rapid Spun out of the way, and Scizor followed, buzzing angrily all the while.

"Is *that* what you tell yourself? I like to cover my bases as much as the next Clairvoyant, but turning on our own kind? Tsk tsk."

Gary reached for Will, and his thoughts propelled him forward. He punched, but Will saw him coming and veered to safety, not even bothering to fight back as he dodged and dashed. Gary's telekinetic power launched him into the air over Will's head so he landed behind the deranged Elite Four member, but Will was ready to evade his attacks even from behind. Out of nowhere, Hypno was suddenly at his side and pulsed with Psychic energy that sent Gary back a few yards. Only Alakazam's interference via Teleportation saved him the skin and muscle flaying usually accompanied by a direct hit. Nevertheless, Gary's chest exploded in pain as Hypno's Psychic attack grazed him and chewed at the tender flesh of his chest beneath his armor and spread to his limbs. The scars Meowth had raked across Gary's face began to itch as he grimaced.

"You don't know anything about it!"

Will burst out laughing. "My god, you truly are that old coot's blood. Virtuous until the end."

Gary paled, and his Miracle Eye faltered. A rush of concern from Espeon hit him like a slap to the face, but he ignored it.

"Where's my gramps? What'd you do to him?"

"Do?" Will gasped and slapped a hand to his forehead. "Oh *goodness*! I completely forgot about him!" His faux surprise melted into a cold glare that made Gary sink back to the ground in a shiver. "I lied. I guess we're both kinslayers. Oops."

There were no tears as fury took over. Alakazam held out its mystical spoons and kept Hypno at bay, and it channeled a silent but clear warning to Gary to stay his ground if he wanted to live.

"You... He's..." He couldn't even say it.

Will's previous façade was gone, and he merely stared at Gary now with a hollowness to him that was more suited to the dead than the

living. "You know, Gary Oak? I seem to lie about everything these days. I do it so much, I forget I'm even doing it. What's the difference in the end? She's the only one who can see through me, anyway, so it's a moot point." He approached, and Hypno let him. "I lied about how you're like the old geezer was, too. You're not. You might be his blood, but you're so much more than that."

For reasons he could not explain, Gary was suddenly more afraid than he'd ever been in all his life watching Will step toward him. "Stop right there, don't come any closer."

Alakazam released a burst of Psychic energy, but Will waved a hand and deflected it.

"Oak died too fast in the end. Unfortunately, I can't bring myself to care about that. Like you I surround myself with a...different crowd. But now that I have you here, it's just another moot point." He paused and now they were mere feet apart, Alakazam in between them. "Did you know, Gary? All Clairvoyants have a special Sight, but we all see different things. You share Sabrina's gift, the insight into the heart of darkness. Others of us can glimpse the future, or at least a version of it. And me?"

He suddenly Teleported behind Gary with Hypno's help, and Alakazam whirled in a tizzy. But Will's hand spun Gary around and he closed his other hand over Gary's face, digging his nails into the soft flesh and drawing blood.

"I can revisit the past whenever I want. And I can take you with me."

Gary clawed at Will's hand, but as if in a dream, there was suddenly nothing to scrape at as he was transported to a place and time far away. A solemn, grey castle rose up all around him, and a stone's throw away, Oak and his Slowking and Gardevoir were doing their best to attack him. Bewildered, Gary tried to back up.

Gramps, it's me!

But Oak bellowed out a command for his Pokémon to attack, and the air rippled and sparked with their Psychic energy. Honchkrow swooped in to his rescue above, thwarting Oak's plans.

"Sam, don't do this!"

Agatha's screaming drew Gary's attention to the old woman straddling Oak's Pidgeot. He recognized Rosa from the last time they'd met, too.

Agatha was a frail shadow of her former self even at a distance, but the fear in her eyes was plain to see. Oak cast her a look over his shoulder.

"Help them, Aggie. I know you can."

The sky behind Oak began to gyrate with energy out of nowhere, and a silvery vortex materialized. The Future Sight attack shot out of the darkness and hurtled straight for Oak as Rosa and Agatha lifted off into the night. The body Gary was in wouldn't move, wouldn't even scream out to Oak to warn him. He could only watch and die inside as the inevitable descended.

No! he screamed in his head, fighting with all he had to reach out to no avail. *Gramps, get out of there!*

But the eyes through which Gary saw narrowed in delight with no awareness of his anguish, and he understood. These were Will's memories, not his own, and he would watch Oak die through the eyes of his killer. A rush of giddy excitement shot down his spine as he watched the Future Sight engulf Oak and hurtle him through the air, unable even for feel angry or despairing or anything at all but a passing satisfaction that orders had been followed.

I killed him, he thought before he could stop himself.

The thought awakened unwanted feelings of glee and accomplishment.

"I killed him!" he shouted in Will's voice.

He couldn't even cry as he watched Oak lose his balance and launch forward, body twisting at an unnatural angle. Somewhere far off, Gary could feel his own body hit the ground, his knees against the dry rock, feeble under Will's unwanted spell. He would die, too, just like Oak. Will's fingers dug into his temples and opened up the old scars Meowth had drawn across Gary's face.

Oak's body rushed toward him, pushed along by the Future Sight attack and slowly consumed, limb by limb. But all of a sudden, the old man snapped his eyes open and appeared directly in front of Gary. Before Gary could question it, the force holding him back had dissolved and he was floating in a dead space, awash with Future Sight's light but suspended somehow in the great, blank white. Footsteps echoed behind him.

"Gary."

He spun at the sound of that voice, on the verge of tears but unwilling to let them fall. Oak stood before him in his lab coat, a lit cigarette in hand. He took a drag of it and savored the smoke like a lovely kiss.

"Gramps," Gary said, barely a whisper as his voice cracked.

"If you can see me now, then I'm long dead," Oak said. "And Will must be showing you his memories to cause you pain."

"How do you...?"

"So, you must know that we all have a little something extra we can use in times of great need." Oak took another drag of his cigarette and smiled. Crows' feet crinkled around his eyes. "Mine is the ability to manipulate dreams. I'm sure you must have wondered why Agatha agreed to stay away all these years without a fuss. Can't say I'm proud of what I did, but what's done is done."

Gary could only stare. He tried to touch Oak, but he found he couldn't reach and his feet wouldn't move. "Gramps, can't you hear me?"

"But you, well, I knew you would seek out what I could never seem to grasp—the ability to look into the heart of darkness and come out stronger." Oak's expression fell. "I don't have much time, and I know you must have questions, so I'll try to be brief. I always did tend to ramble on and on."

He looked up at Gary, though Gary got the distinct impression Oak wasn't seeing him at all. That he wasn't hearing him, either. It was like watching an old recording, eyes staring into nothing.

"Gary, don't be afraid of who you are and what you can do. I know...it can seem terrible at times. God knows there are days when I wished I could go back and erase it all. But you have something I never had, and that's why you'll succeed where I foolishly chose to fail. I told you before that darkness and light could do incredible things together if they just took a moment to stop fighting each other. If you're seeing this now, then you have proof of it. These two, Will and Karen, they've embraced something I always denied because I was a too craven to see otherwise."

Gary shook his head. "You're too late. Whatever this dream is, it's too late. Will's already won."

Oak went on, unhearing. "You have a choice to make, and I'm here to tell you not to fear that choice. We're all monsters in the end, Gary. And monsters can do extraordinary things."

Gary recalled Lily's words to him when he was at his lowest. What did they see that he still didn't?

"I'm out of time," Oak said. He took another drag of his cigarette and blew the smoke languidly over his head, smiling a little. "But I want you to know that I'm sorry. I wasn't your father, and I failed at trying to be after Tabitha died. But I know... I know you'll do what I was too afraid to do. So consider this my blessing. You've always had it, you know."

He reached out a hand to Gary, smiling.

"Of all the things I've done in my life, you were my greatest achievement. So please, don't be afraid to live on, no matter the cost."

Gary tried to reach for Oak in the dream and brushed his fingers, grasping. The white light intensified and washed out Oak's silhouette until there was nothing there, and all Gary could do was cry out.

"Gramps!"

Don't leave me.

A sudden cold surge hit Gary in the chest and knocked him back, and once again he felt the solid earth under him as he fell. The dream spell was broken, and his face ached with the pain of Will's incisions. Regaining his senses, he blinked his dream-sleep away and slowly took in his surroundings. Hypno, glowing red, clutched its three-toed paw to its chest in pain. Will bared his teeth in a nasty snarl that betrayed his disappointment. Alakazam stood just ahead of Gary, and next to it stood Ivy, knife in hand. With his Miracle Eye vision, Gary followed the tendrils of dark energy that emanated from her body and engulfed the knife.

"Don't fucking touch him," Ivy hissed.

Gary struggled to his feet, and Alakazam was by his side in an instant. The Psychic was exhausted, having fended off Hypno and Will the entire time up until now, but it remained standing.

"What did you do!" Will bellowed, clutching his head.

Gary ignored him. "You killed my grandfather," he managed, standing up straight and approaching Ivy. "You murdered him in cold blood, and you forced me to relive it."

Will huddled behind Hypno to regain himself, and Gary settled at Ivy's side. He closed his hand around hers and gently retrieved the knife she held.

"But you didn't count on us," Gary went on.

Will bared his teeth. "Fool! We're invincible! You can't stop us, not even Lance himself was willing to challenge our claim to the Elite Four!"

"Gary," Ivy said.

"We're better than you." Tears welled in Gary's eyes as he remembered Oak's last words imparted in a dream. "He knew we were."

"Gary," Ivy said again.

"Go. Finish her. I've got this."

Ivy hesitated a moment, but nearby Tyranitar and Wigglytuff were still dealing with Vileplume and Honchkrow while Karen herself fought with her lash. With a nod, Ivy dashed off to rejoin her Pokémon, leaving Gary and Will with their Psychics.

"Stupid boy, the only thing you can do with darkness is keep it at arm's length! Why do you think Karen and I work so well together? You're nothing like us!" Will bellowed.

Espeon limped toward Gary and Alakazam now that Karen had recalled Houndoom to her side for protection. The three of them slowly advanced on Will.

"No, we're not. We're better. I'm better than you because I'm not afraid. I'm better than Gramps."

Will shrieked incoherently, and Hypno burst with another Psychic attack. Together, Alakazam, Gary, and Espeon absorbed and deflected it. Pain erupted down the length of Gary's right arm, but he swallowed it and clutched Ivy's knife harder. He advanced.

Hypno attacked again, but once more Gary and his Pokémon deflected the attempt. Will tried to back up, but Gary ran after him on shaking

legs. Hypno tried to intervene, but Alakazam tackled it in a rare display of physical force. Espeon was quick to join in and sank its teeth into Hypno's neck, tearing at its windpipe without remorse. Will tried to scramble away to safety, but Gary was upon him.

"Stop!" Will shouted.

"No."

Without hesitating, Gary swiped at Will and deflected his attempts to block. Will was trained but slow, his limbs heavy with disuse when he depended on Karen to be the brawn to his brains, and soon enough Gary found an opening to sink Ivy's knife into the juncture between Will's neck and shoulder. He drove in the blade to the the hilt and pushed Will to the ground. They struggled a moment, and Gary's eyes, long faded to their usual green, trained on Will's as the light left them.

Will sputtered, incoherent, and Gary leaned in. "Die, and be forgotten."

Blood burst from Will's mouth and his eyes were wide as saucers. Death was nearly instantaneous as he lost too much blood in the course of a few seconds, and his head fell back on the ground with a soft *thud*. The war continued around them, but Gary continued the staring contest with the corpse underneath him and breathed heavily. Nearby, Alakazam and Espeon had finished off Hypno and moved to help Scizor with Starmie a short ways off. Hypno lay bleeding, its face torn to shreds.

Tears splashed Will's cheeks as Gary trembled and his emotions finally caught up with him. But even now was too soon as he heard Tyranitar roar to his right. He had to wrench his hand from the knife embedded in Will's neck as though it were frozen solid, but he managed to limp to his knees in time to see Wigglytuff blast the resilient Honchkrow with a Moonblast that rendered it totally incapacitated. Black feathers curled at the ends as though burned, and the dark bird squawked in agony. Tyranitar snatched it from the air with one of its meaty claws and ripped off its head in its teeth, silencing it once and for all. Houndoom, ablaze, ran down Vileplume despite the Petal Dance attack that drew deep lesions in its fur, fueled by anger and hatred. Vileplume didn't even know what hit it, and its flower crown burst into flame just before Houndoom pounced and ripped into it with fiery fangs.

Ivy herself sidestepped Karen's exhausted Houndoom in a brilliant

feint and drove one of her knives into its side and pulled. She yanked out a hunk of flesh, causing the hellhound to howl in pain and sink to the ground. It didn't put up much of a fight after its scuffle with Espeon, having lost too much blood. Wigglytuff was right behind her and blasted Karen herself with a Moonblast attack that exploded on contact with the ground and sent Karen tumbling. Karen's armor began to warp at the legs where Wigglytuff's attack hit, like it was melting, and she screamed.

Ivy drew another knife to throw, but Tyranitar was already there. With agility no one knew it possessed, the green dinosaur threw itself forward with a roar and punched the ground with fists and tail, inducing a massive but narrowly directed Earthquake that erupted under Karen's feet. Karen lost her balance, already wounded, and dropped her whip as the earth gobbled her up from below. Rock spires pierced her chest and abdomen clean through several times over, and she hunched limply. Struggling to stand, Ivy trudged toward her, knife in hand.

"Still s-such a disappointment," Karen rasped. "Can't even do it yourself..."

Ivy stared down at Karen for a long while, eyes glazed with unshed tears. "Then I'm a disappointment. So be it."

Wigglytuff, exhausted and bleeding from the whipping Karen had given it earlier, hopped next to Ivy, still willing to fight if the occasion called for it. Karen sucked in a wheezing breath.

"Y-You can't even kill me yourself."

"No," Ivy said. "I love you too much. You left me in the dark, but I found my way back. You turned my fear into strength, and I've always loved you for that. And I know you love me, too."

Karen coughed up blood that splattered over the rock that impaled her, and Ivy kneeled down.

"You love me enough to die for me, don't you?" Ivy caressed Karen's cheek and smeared blood on her pale skin. She tightened her dirty fingers around Karen's chin, leaving harsh imprints in her cheek. Karen watched her with wide eyes glazed with pain and delirium as the sheen in them evanesced, giving way to something darker and far more primal.

Ivy leaned in close. "So now I leave you in the dark."

A chilling death rattle passed through Karen's parched lips and sucked the life from her. Her face contorted and shriveled like an old woman's as Ivy dug her fingers deeper into Karen's sallow cheeks, then silence. He found her like that, crouched in the rubble clutching Karen's face, unblinking with her uninjured fingers clenched tight around a knife, white-knuckled and ready to strike in the blink of an eye. Umbreon's broken body lay a few feet away. Dust had settled over it from the scuffle, and at some point it had caught fire and smoldered silently.

"Ivy," Gary said, voice cracked like someone had taken a hammer to it and smashed it into a hundred jagged pieces that would never fit back together again.

Will's Starmie had long since fled upon its master's demise, and Scizor and Alakazam huddled on either side of Gary struggling to remain upright after the hard fight. Espeon, fine fur matted with blood, nonetheless trotted to Ivy's side and waited patiently. Wigglytuff was on the ground, nose twitching and eyes dilated. Tyranitar and Houndoom feasted on the remains of Karen's Pokémon, willfully ignorant of their wounds and exhaustion.

"Ivy," Gary said again. He put weight on his right leg and hissed when it flamed up with a stinging agony. Blood pooled under his foot. He couldn't even remember when he'd injured it.

All of a sudden, she turned to look at him. Her eyes were bloodshot and flooded with tears as she wept silently. Snot dripped from her nose, soot and sweat formed a second skin over her face and neck, and her long hair was singed at the ends in places where it had brushed the fire's wandering fingers. He didn't need a mirror to know he looked no better. His leg spasmed under his weight, but Scizor caught him on a steady pincer before he could fall over.

"Gary," she said.

Espeon looked back at Gary and swished its forked tail. A flock of Charizard passed overhead in formation and lit up the night sky with a round of Flamethrowers, perfectly in sync, that immolated a group of enemy Skarmory. They burned to a crisp before even their ashes could escape and float to the ground.

"C'mon." He limped close enough to reach out a hand for Ivy. "We can't stay here. Ash and Lily are still out there."

Ivy stared up at him, and something in him nearly broke seeing her like this. "The Professor..."

Gary's throat knotted and he almost choked on his next breath. Biting his tongue hard enough to draw blood from the old wound he'd received when flying around earlier with Ash, he grabbed Ivy's hand.

"C'mon," he said again. "I won't leave you here."

Tyranitar and Houndoom approached, and Scizor kept a wary, red eye on the former. The blackened claw marks where Sabrina's Hypno had accosted Tyranitar with its Miracle Eye-enhanced Dream Eater were shadowy tears painted into Tyranitar's muzzle and cheeks. Ivy shakily got to her feet, knife still in hand, and bit back a wince at the ache in her back. Her gaze fell to Umbreon's body, hardly recognizable anymore, and she shuddered.

"I won't leave you, either."

He held her hand tight in his while Tyranitar let her lean against it for support. The dinosaur's yellow eye trained on Scizor, but the two natural rivals ignored each other and trudged onward, slowly enough to let Gary and Ivy keep up.

Karen's and Will's bodies grew cold in their wake.

People and Pokémon ran past him without a second glance, too much in a hurry and with bigger things to worry about than a plain-faced man in unmarked armor. Giovanni stayed in the cover of an awning out of sight on the outskirts of Cinnabar's northern district. The farmhouse was abandoned by now, evacuated in the chaos of war and impending natural disaster. Persian, sleek as greased lightning, stayed close to his side ready to cut like a knife at a moment's notice. Its yellow eyes glowed in the night.

He was alone for the time being while Jessie brought up the rear a ways behind. The plucky Rocket Grunt had proven herself useful and able to take orders, and her brash personality diverted attention away from Giovanni. Her Arbok was currently rampaging down the dirt road that wound into town farther ahead, spitting poison at any Cinnabarean soldiers with dreams of heroism. This task he had to do alone, and distraction was his greatest ally.

Giovanni stepped around the house and kneeled down to tap the earth with his knuckles. In a matter of seconds, the ground opened up just in front of him. Three heads, identical nubs of brown, leathery skin and sensitive, pink snouts, poked up from the rubble but didn't emerge fully. Dugtrio were blind, having no need for sight when they lived

out their natural lives in subterranean darkness. But it sensed Giovanni's hand and sniffed at his palm with one of its three oblong heads. No one had ever seen what Dugtrio looked like below ground. They buried their dead too deep for humans to dig and too dangerous to try. Perhaps it was like Dodrio, a three-headed monstrosity, or perhaps it was merely a cluster of lesser Pokémon, like Exeggcute. No one knew for sure, and no one was stupid enough to try to find out.

Giovanni's dark gaze flickered to Mt. Cinnabar looming above. "Aim thirty degrees south by southwest."

Dugtrio grunted like a pig, its pink snouts wrinkling as it absorbed its master's command, and it swiftly sank below ground again. Seconds later, an Earthquake attack originating from below ground rumbled the farmhouse Giovanni stood next to, raining dust on him. A hundred yards ahead, the earth split and rock spires burst skyward like swimmers starved for air. The tremor continued and struck the base of Mt. Cinnabar, drawing a crack up its northwestern face. A minute later, another Earthquake rumbled far to the east as Giovanni's second Dugtrio echoed its brother's lead. For a blind, repugnant mole Pokémon, Dugtrio moved lightning fast underground and could communicate with their kind from miles away. Hideous, but useful.

Persian hissed and leaped in front of Giovanni all of a sudden, teeth bared. He got to his feet and looked around.

"Show yourself," he commanded.

"G-Man, long time. I gotta say, I'm *not* happy to see you."

Out of the gloom, a young man and woman emerged flanked by bulky Pokémon. Giovanni recognized them—they were Marco's friends, Ethan and Lyra, if he recalled their names. A Meganium dwarfed Lyra and twitched its antennae. The bright, fuchsia petals that grew from its neck quivered. Ethan was accompanied by a hulking Typhlosion, whose back smoked with pent-up flames, and an Ampharos sparking with static electricity.

"Oh, it's you," Giovanni said, quickly calculating the distance between Jessie and himself. He scuffed the ground with a foot, dark eyes scanning for signs of Dugtrio.

"You stole something of ours," Lyra said. "We're here to take him back."

"*He* is my son, Marco. And he's *mine*, you stupid girl."

Lyra's eyes flashed with anger, but it was Ethan that could hardly contain his smirk as he happily rose to the bait.

"Stupid? That's mean *and* uncreative. Now I've got another reason to fry you from the inside out. Thunderbolt!"

Ampharos lifted its fin-like appendages and burst with electricity that arced toward Giovanni. But Giovanni was ready with a Pokéball and shielded his face from the ensuing light. Nidoqueen roared as it absorbed the attack, unfazed, and positioned itself between Giovanni and his enemies. Giovanni's two Dugtrio emerged from below ground in the aftermath.

"My turn," Lyra said. "Leaf Storm!"

Meganium's flower erupted with razor-sharp leaves and petals that kicked up a violent vortex and headed for Giovanni.

"Fire Spin!" Ethan shouted.

Typhlosion's back burst into flames that whipped up in a frenzy and swirled among Meganium's Leaf Storm, incinerating leaves and growing the vortex to twice its size. Giovanni attempted to retreat with Persian, leaving Nidoqueen to fend off the attack.

"Earthquake!" he barked.

The two Dugtrio slipped below ground just before the combined attack could hit them, and together they set off a massive tremor. Nidoqueen took the Leaf Storm and Fire Spin attacks head on, giving Giovanni enough time to retreat to safety. Ethan and Lyra cried out as the ground split underneath them, and Lyra grabbed onto Meganium's back. Rock spires shot up around Ethan and Lyra, forcing them apart. Ethan slammed into Ampharos, and the two of them went tumbling.

"Thunderbolt!"

Ethan rolled with Ampharos, and keeping his arm around its neck, he reached out with his free hand and redirected the Pokémon's attack toward Giovanni. The lightning caught up to Giovanni faster than he could run and chewed up the ground underneath his feet, sending him into a faceplant. Electricity sparked along his armor, but he pushed himself up on hands and knees.

"The hell?" Ethan struggled to his feet and winced, clutching a couple broken ribs.

Nidoqueen, scratched up and charred black in places from the earlier combined attack, lumbered toward Giovanni. Ethan tried to get to his feet with Ampharos's help, but Lyra was quicker and bore no signs of pain or injury even after getting caught up in the Earthquake.

"Solar Beam!"

The petals ringing Meganium's scaly neck shook and glowed. The dinosaur-like Pokémon opened its mouth, exposing flat, broad teeth, and spat out a thick shaft of light that shot for Giovanni. Lyra herself ran alongside it. The attack hit Nidoqueen square in the chest, and the armored rodent screeched in pain. Lyra sped on by just as Giovanni regained himself and let loose with a punch to his gut.

Armor cracked, and the two of them skidded backward a couple feet. Giovanni was doubled over Lyra's fist, and for a split second it looked like she'd bested him. But the Rocket Boss let out a choked laugh and slammed his fist in her face, snapping her head around forty-five degrees. Lyra staggered back, a hand cupping her abused left temple, but she remained standing.

"Lyra!" Ethan shouted as Typhlosion caught up with Ampharos and him and they regrouped.

Giovanni's stomach ached from the girl's hard punch, and he eyed her with barely concealed disdain as she collected herself.

"I always liked Atlas. You're like a human punching bag, and I love to punch."

Lyra spat blood and something that looked like part of a tooth onto the ground. "Punch all you like, you won't keep me from hunting you down."

Her temple was already turning purple, mostly likely fractured, yet she glared at him as though the pain were nugatory. Anyone else who took a punch like that from an Adamantine like himself would have been dead before they hit the ground. Giovanni's gaze shifted briefly to Nidoqueen, who was sprawled on the ground with her entire abdomen hollowed out and smoking, unmoving. The girl's Meganium was making its way to her side, and the boy was finally on his feet.

"Where's Marco?" Lyra demanded. "Tell me where he is!"

Giovanni bared his teeth in a grin. "Here, of course. Doing his duty to Team Rocket." A swooshing sound caught his ear, and he took a step

back. "Just as I've done mine. Farewell."

"No!"

"Flamethrower!"

Typhlosion suddenly spewed a column of molten, orange fire at Giovanni, startling Meganium, but the attack never hit its target. A thick, black sludge collided with it out of nowhere and caught fire. Noxious gas emanated from the burning sludge and filled the immediate area with an eye-watering, acrid stench that set Meganium on edge, forcing Lyra to backtrack with it. An Arbok slithered just beyond the burning sludge, fangs bared and dripping venom.

"Boss, get on!"

Jessie held out a hand for Giovanni to board her Yanmega while Arbok faced Typhlosion. The Volcano Pokémon roared and stamped its short front legs on the earth, teeth bared and slicked with boiling drool.

Giovanni took Jessie's hand and she hauled him onto Yanmega's back.

"Gunk Shot!" she snapped.

Arbok threw back its head to spit out another glob of poison, but Typhlosion lunged at it, the flames on its back grown to three times its length. The flames engulfed it and it rammed Arbok, fearless of the venom. Superheated teeth sank into Arbok's neck and ripped through the tough scales to the tender muscle underneath. Yanmega buzzed and rose in the air.

"Arbok!" Jessie shrieked.

Giovanni recalled Persian.

"Kill them!" he shouted back at the ground where his two Dugtrio remained hidden.

Nidoqueen continued to smoke, and he paid her no more than a last, brief glance. A white light flashed below just as Yanmega reached an altitude of thirty feet.

"I don't think so!"

Ethan had released a prickly Jolteon to join his Ampharos on the ground, and together they generated enough electricity to power the

entire northern district of Cinnabar. Lightning bolts shot into the sky at random angles, missing Yanmega completely, but Ethan ran after the giant Bug, one fisted hand trailing behind him. Arbok writhed, but Typhlosion sank its teeth in deeper while its flames roasted the snake alive.

"Arbok!" Jessie fumbled with a Pokéball, but Yanmega was too far away for her laser to reach Arbok.

The huge snake snapped its jaws frantically and managed to tear into Typhlosion's shoulder, but the fires burned its flesh and blackened its teeth, evaporating the poison that filled its fangs. Giovanni was more concerned about the youth chasing him.

"Forget it! Get us out of here!" he yelled at Jessie.

Ampharos and Jolteon continued to generate electricity that jumped in between them as they trailed after Ethan, Jolteon hot on his heels and the slower Ampharos lagging behind. Giovanni began to sweat, and he shoved Jessie aside to reach for the reins.

"Fly!"

"Thunder!" Ethan shouted below.

He punched the sky, and the electricity generated by Ampharos and Jolteon struck him through his trailing fist, traveled across his chest, and shot out from his outstretched hand directly at Yanmega. Jessie screamed and Yanmega tried to swerve, but the normally erratic Thunder attack was deadly accurate under Ethan's redirection. Lightning exploded over Yanmega's segmented underbelly, cracking its exoskeleton and frying its innards. Sparks danced along its translucent wings and ate through them like flames through paper. The Bug struggled to stay airborne, but the struggle soon became futile and it plummeted to the earth toward the heart of the battle near the northern coast.

"Ethan!" Lyra, now mounted on a sure-footed Stantler, caught up to Ethan and released a Girafarig. "Get on, hurry!"

The ground rumbled again as Giovanni's Dugtrio renewed their subterranean subterfuge, now focused completely on Ethan and Lyra as their master attempted to flee. Ampharos screech as the earth split open underfoot and sucked it half under. A sharp rock pierced through its thigh and spilled blood, trapping it.

"Amphy!"

Ethan recalled the Light Pokémon before the Earthquake could tear it in half, followed by Jolteon. Typhlosion, still aflame, abandoned its assault on Arbok, which now lay dead among the rubble and soon to be buried underneath it at the rate the Dugtrio were going. Ethan struggled to climb onto Girafarig's back, but Lyra hauled him up by the back of his collar with the strength of someone much larger and buffer than she looked. Together with Typhlosion loping alongside them, Ethan and Lyra dashed through the collapsing northern district toward the coast as the earth fell away behind them.

"Oh shit!" Ethan said, looking back.

"Don't look back!"

A rock spire burst from the earth in front of them, but Girafarig glowed blue with Confusion and lifted Stantler and itself into the air over it while Typhlosion barrelled through coated in Flame Wheel. The two Dugtrio grunted angrily in their wake as they gave chase.

Giovanni counted about seven seconds until Yanmega hit the ground, so he stood up in the back saddle using Jessie for leverage and jumped.

"Boss!" he heard her scream as Yanmega lurched.

Giovanni ignored her plight and reached for another Pokéball at his belt. The ground rushed to meet him, and soldiers and their Pokémon scrambled to get out of the way before he crushed them. Some were not quick enough. In a flash of light, a twelve-foot tall Rhydon appeared under Giovanni as he fell and pulled him into a protective embrace. A breath later, they hit the ground.

Pain bloomed in Giovanni's head as his forehead smacked against Rhydon's hard chest, and for a moment he saw nothing but darkness. The rock-hard rhino shifted and got up, stepping on a wounded Cinnabarean soldier's leg as it stood. His screams were soon silenced when Rhydon turned to set Giovanni down and accidentally stepped on the soldier's head with its other foot. The soldier's Ponyta and the Granbull it had been fighting lay in the crater Rhydon had made, smashed together and painted red, indiscernible from one another.

Giovanni patted Rhydon on its arm, but his gaze was elsewhere as he searched the battlefield. Ethan and Lyra would catch up with him soon, and he couldn't linger. He couldn't see where Jessie and

Yanmega had landed, but it mattered little. Her part was done. In the distance, Mt. Cinnabar groaned as earthquakes continued to pummel it, both induced and natural. Dugtrio's efforts had begun a chain reaction that would slowly build, and soon this war would be over once and for all. Giovanni pressed his lips into a grim line.

A ghastly roar near the bay to the northeast drew his attention, but instead of foreboding, it filled him with a sense of exhilaration. Giovanni tossed out another Pokéball, and a Kangaskhan materialized next to Rhydon. It reached only nine feet in height, but its thick arms and powerful hind legs made it more than a match for Rhydon's strength.

A colossal figure reared up from the dark bay waters where the Cinnabar infantry forces were fighting the bulk of Team Rocket's might. The creature roared and blasted a Hyper Beam as thick around as a tree trunk at the soldiers fighting near the coast and decimated a hundred yards of beach and farmland. The glare from the light illuminated its blood-red scales to match the rage in its eyes.

Giovanni's steps grew lighter as he headed straight for it, heart fluttering in anticipation. "I'm coming, Marco. Wait for me."

A moment of silence for Umbreon, whose death has been the hardest part of this fic for me to write thus far.

24. Cinnabar Island, Part 4

Triumvirate, chapter 24: Cinnabar Island, Part 4
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon
Note: FYI, I posted a list of the Tamer classes in my profile, finally. You can check that out if you like!

Searing heat washed over Lily in a sticky wave. The exposed skin of her face burned, and she threw up her arms to shield herself. But there was no ripping pain, no incinerating demise, and she choked on a held breath. The light faded, and all she was left with was a bad sunburn.

"Who the hell are you?" Ariana said.

Lily blinked the stars out of her eyes and slowly managed to focus on a dark silhouette in front of her. She had the urge to call out to Dragonair, but it wasn't her sleek Dragon that had protected her just now.

"Someone who's seen enough of what your lot's done to wanna see you dead for it."

A wondrous wall of yellow light shimmered in front of the newcomer and her serpent, where the last vestiges of Victreebel's Solar Beam dissipated into nothing. Lily struggled to stand, her left arm limp and aching at her side, and squinted.

"Rosa!" she said, shocked. "Is that you?"

Rosa stood her ground between Lily and Victreebel. Her regal Serperior towered over her, red eyes narrowed and condescending. She didn't spare Lily a glance as she kept a careful eye on the enemy. "You okay there, kid? A little Solar Beam too much for you?"

Pikachu jumped to the ground to join Omastar, sparking in anticipation. Lily set her jaw. "I'm okay, thanks to you."

"Soon to be *not* okay! Leaf Storm!" Ariana snarled.

Victreebel screeched and whipped up a terrible twister of razor-sharp leaves. Rosa tossed out another Pokéball.

"Icicle Crash!"

A snow-white Beartic emerged from the light and charged. Its icy

beard grew with every frosty breath, and frostlings crystallized upon its thick coat and gathered into small, sharp icicles. Fearless, Beartic stampeded right through the Leaf Storm and rammed Victreebel before the grotesque Pokémon could scuttle away. Ice cracked against the Gyarados scales grafted to its hide, raining a fine, diamond dust on the earth. But Beartic roared and gnashed its thick teeth and groped with its front paws, hoping to rip into Victreebel.

Movement to Lily's left drew her attention to the ongoing fight between Ursaring, Dragonair, and Ninetales. Blaine had run out of patience, and he turned his full attention to the fight.

"Fire Spin!"

Ninetales howled and whipped up a wicked vortex with its many tails that headed for the grappling Ursaring and Dragonair. They saw it coming and split apart, but Dragonair emanated a swift Dragon Pulse that sent Ursaring tumbling. Raw, draconian power ripped into the bear's middle, tearing flesh and cracking bone, and it wailed just as Ninetales's Fire Spin slammed into it. In a matter of seconds, Ursaring's flesh was burned entirely away as it staggered, blind and in agony, against the flames. It tripped over the body of the Rhydon Dragonair and Omastar had finished off earlier and landed ungracefully. The flames feasted. It didn't get up again.

Ariana backed up and drew the shortsword strapped to her hip. She gripped it with two hands and bared her teeth.

"I don't know who you are, but *no one* interferes with my revenge!"

Proton, who had been hanging back, drew his own sword as well as another Pokéball. Sensing the danger, Rosa got behind Serperior and pulled a small, black crossbow from her back. Proton threw his last Pokéball and revealed a stout Electrode. Immediately, Lily and Rosa froze.

Blaine soon joined them with Magmortar, Ninetales, and Dragonair in tow, but as soon as he saw Electrode, he too fell still. Without warning, he laid a hand on Lily's left shoulder, inciting a rush of pain.

"Get back," he said quietly in a tone that brooked no room for argument.

Ariana laughed. "What's the matter? Not so tough anymore?"

Beartic continued to grapple with Victreebel and had managed to tear

off a few of the Gyarados scales protecting its porous hide. The polar bear's muzzle was now dyed green with the pitcher plant's blood, and Victreebel tried desperately to get away.

"Call off your beast!" Ariana bellowed.

Rosa set her jaw and leveled her crossbow at Ariana.

"Electrode," Proton said.

Electrode began to spark, and Serperior hissed, sensing the looming danger.

"Rosa!" Lily said, desperate. She was too close to the blast zone.

Rosa's hand was steady, her expression calm, but she didn't fire.

"I said, call him off!" Ariana shouted again, this time brandishing her sword.

"Do it, or I'll blow them both sky high," Proton said.

Blaine said nothing as he watched, but he didn't intervene, either. An Electrode's Explosion was a death knell to anything and anyone in range, no matter how smart or skilled. Tense seconds ticked by, and Rosa lowered her crossbow a little.

"All right," she said. "Just stay calm. Beartic, that's enough."

Beartic snapped at Victreebel's lip and tore a deep gash into its skin, causing the Pokémon to wail in pain. But at Rosa's command, it backed off. Beady, black eyes looked back at her over its shoulder in question. Blaine stepped forward and grabbed Rosa's wrist, drawing her back. Serperior followed, red eyes ever on Ariana and Proton. Slowly, the Rocket Admins backed away from Electrode, swords drawn. Lily counted the seconds.

All of a sudden, Proton's face twisted into a hateful sneer. "Explosion!"

"No!" Rosa screamed and fired her crossbow, but just as she tried to run after Ariana and Proton, Electrode lit up like a supernova and exploded with enough force to send Rosa flying backward. Her crossbow flew out of her hand and scattered across the earth.

Lily stumbled, and it was only Blaine's hand on her injured arm that caught her. Pain erupted in her left shoulder, and she screamed. When she and Blaine recovered, they were squatted on the ground, their

Pokémon behind them, while Rosa lay on her side. Serperior coiled around her, a bright, blue Reflect screen in front of it to shield them both from the worst of the damage. The ground was clouded with smoke, but it rose with the wind and revealed a deep crater spanning a whopping forty feet in diameter.

Gradually, the remains of Beartic and Victreebel came into view, hardly recognizable. Beartic's lower jaw had been ripped clean off and lay several yards away from the rest of the bloody pulp. A hunk of smoking meat, patched with charred, white fur lay within the pulp, though there was no discernible sign of Victreebel left.

Rosa struggled to her feet and laid a hand on Serperior for support as the Reflect screen faded. She looked up, but it took her a moment to take in what she was seeing.

"Beartic?"

Tears welled in Lily's eyes, and she tore out of Blaine's grip to run to Rosa. Pikachu, Omastar, and Dragonair followed. Closer up, the smell was worse and stung her nose and throat. She covered her mouth.

"I warned you," Ariana said from the other side of the crater.

Rosa was pale-faced and unmoving as she stared at Beartic's remains in disbelief. Serperior lowered its head next to her, and Lily felt the serpent's lurid eye settle on her.

"Rosa, I'm so sorry." She tried to reach for the older girl, but Rosa snapped and drew the handaxe at her hip. She took off at a sprint, and Serperior slithered after her.

"Flamethrower!"

Blaine's Ninetales sprinted after Rosa and Serperior and spewed a jet of fire ahead of them that struck the earth and kicked up a wall of flames to separate Ariana and Proton from them. Rosa skidded to a halt and glared back. Lily gasped at the cold look in her eyes.

"Let me pass!" she shouted back.

Blaine returned her glare, and Ariana and Proton fell back some more. "Rosa," he tried out her name. "Calm down."

Rosa bared her teeth in fury and turned back to Proton and Ariana. "Solar Beam!"

Serperior powered up the attack and blasted through the wall of fire. Proton swore and dashed to the side to avoid the attack, but Ariana used the distraction to run at Rosa directly now that the flames were forcibly dissipated. Before Rosa could think, the two women clashed in a flurry of steel. Blaine made his way to Lily's position as quickly as he could.

"Get out of my way," he barked, flail in hand and Magmortar at his side.

Rosa swung and Ariana caught her sword with her own blade. "I'll kill you!" Rosa screamed.

"Join my fanclub, bitch." Ariana pushed her back, and Rosa stumbled.

In the commotion, no one saw it coming. A freezing chill gusted through the area followed by a sharp whistling that descended from on high. Serperior moved lightning fast and swung its tail over Rosa's head just before the attacking Skarmory could make contact with her. The steel bird squawked in pain as it veered off course and swooped back in the direction from which it had come.

"About damn time," Proton said. "I was almost about to lose faith in our Chimera tech."

A boy around Lily's age walked solemnly forward, his steps so light they were hardly audible. He was dressed in the same Rocket regalia as Ariana and Proton, and his shoulder-length red hair was tied back in a low ponytail. But Lily gaped in horror at the ghastly contraption that was eating away at half his fair face. A headpiece similar to the ones the Chimera Pokémon had been wearing was strapped to the boy's head, burrowed into his ear and eye socket. His remaining eye was half-lidded in a vacuous stare, and he had one hand on the remaining Pokéballs at his belt.

A bipedal Pokémon walked at his side, and Lily immediately recognized it as the source of the sudden chill. Its fur was black at pitch, frostbitten, and its claws were as long as its forearms and razor sharp. A Weavile, if memory served. Skarmory swooped around and landed by the boy's side, favoring its left wing after the beating Serperior had given it.

The boy calmly approached Proton and Ariana, eyed them briefly, then waved his hand. Weavile lunged without warning. Those kitchen knife claws moved faster than the eye could see over Proton's throat, clean through his collarbone, and midway down his chest. By the time

his blood spurted and he began to sway, Weavile was back at the boy's side and licking its bloody talons clean. Proton sputtered and sagged to the ground a bit like a deflated balloon, pittering out and shrinking to nothing.

Ariana tensed. "Proton was an old friend, Marco," she hissed.

"And now he's a dead friend."

"Just because you're Giovanni's son doesn't give you the right to—"

"To what?" Marco peered at her, but he betrayed nothing of his true feelings. In fact, there seemed to be nothing at all behind his remaining eye. Lily's skin crawled. "To dispose of my agents as I see fit? He doubted Chimera, which means he doubted Team Rocket. The punishment for that is death."

Ariana shut up quick, and a cold dread ran down Lily's spine. Whoever this person was, if he could scare Ariana into submission, he had to be worse than anything or anyone Lily had ever come across before.

"Gym Leader Blaine," Marco said. "It's time for you to die."

Blaine remained where he was a short ways behind Lily and Rosa, Magmortar and Ninetales at his sides. "Young man, I shit turds with more honor than you. You've come to *my* island and started a war. It's you who'll die today."

Rosa didn't need words to make her own introduction. "Leaf Blade!"

Serperior hissed and shot forward toward Marco blindingly fast and brought its scythe-like tail down on Weavile. The ground split under the force of Serperior's attack, but Marco and Weavile escaped. Weavile rolled to safety, but Marco jumped an incredible forty feet in the air and back toward the coast, light as a feather, and hovered there for a couple seconds riding the winds as though he were a bird himself.

Blaine charged forward. "Caelifer!" he spat. "Don't let him get far!"

Marco's steely expression became even graver as he slowly floated back to the shore just yards from the water's edge. He had a new Pokéball in hand, which he tossed out. The bay water behind him splashed as the light coalesced into a giant figure, red as blood, and towered fifty feet overhead. Marco jumped again, defying the laws of gravity, and floated to the creature's head, where he steadied himself

on its crimson crown. He tossed out yet another Pokéball, and a fluffy Honchkrow joined Weavile and Skarmory on the ground before taking to the night skies with a caw.

The red Gyarados roared, and Lily's heart skipped with terror. "Oh no..."

Dragonair slithered up by her side, its mere presence calming despite the dire situation. There was a glint in its dark eyes, not rage or sadness, but anticipation. Pikachu hopped ahead and Lily and sparked, squeaking angrily. Even the shy Omastar fluttered at her feet, awaiting orders.

"Run!" Blaine shouted.

And not a moment too soon. Rosa grabbed onto Serperior and hauled herself onto its back as it slithered away as quickly as it could. Dragonair coiled around Lily and scooped her up until she got the message to hang on with her right arm. Pikachu and Omastar latched onto the Dragon's long, thick body as it slithered toward the water. Not a moment later, Gyarados fired off a massive Hyper Beam that cut into the beach and the land beyond, scattering Blaine and his Pokémon, who barely avoided the worst of the attack. The aftershock nearly threw Lily from Dragonair's back, but the Dragon made it to the water and skated over the surface. Omastar fell into the depths while Pikachu scrambled onto Lily's shoulder. The red Gyarados roared its pride, unmatched by any who might dare to challenge it.

As long as that Gyarados can fight, Blaine and Rosa can't do a thing on land. I have to stop it!

Above, Honchkrow and Skarmory began to swoop at Blaine, while Weavile remained near the water's edge and conjured Icy Winds that kept Rosa and Serperior away from the shoreline. Gritting her teeth, Lily threw her last Pokéball.

"Hydro Pump!"

Kingdra reared up from the Pokéball's release light and, along with Omastar, fired off twin jets of water that slammed into Gyarados's side hard enough to send it crashing into the sea. The ensuing wave hurtled Lily and Dragonair high into the air, but the Dragon caught its balance and floated in midair while the waters frothed below, drowning Kingdra and Omastar temporarily. Marco lost his grip and fell to shore, where he tumbled over the sand.

Unfortunately, the little stunt drew his attention to her, and as he rose on all fours, Lily felt the hands of whatever gods were watching take hold of her heart and squeeze.

"You!" he bellowed.

"Dragon Rush!"

She let go of Dragonair, and the lithe serpent shot forward, cutting through the water like a blue bullet over ice.

Marco struggled to his feet too slowly, and Dragonair was nearly upon him. But the red Gyarados roared and struck with a Crunch attack that bit through five feet of sand and forced Dragonair off course. The Dragon Rush hit Gyarados in the gills, knocking it into the sandy beach. Marco himself jumped again, rising a good forty feet into the air and completely avoiding the attack.

Caelifer, Lily recalled Blaine's name for him. *A Flying Tamer?*

As he slowly floated back to the ground, Marco drew several knives sheathed on his person and threw them at Lily. Incredibly, they zeroed in on her with such precision as if he were aiming from just ten feet in front of her. With a yelp, she tried to fall back in the water, but one of the knives struck her in her injured shoulder and drew blood. Forced underwater, Lily screamed and swallowed seawater, choking. Something rippled near her, and Kingdra rose from the depths to shoot a Dragon Pulse that intercepted the rest of the throwing knives before they could hit Lily, dissolving them to dust on contact.

Something hard nudged her in the back and brought her back to the surface. Omastar treaded water beneath Lily, keeping her afloat so she could breath. Pikachu dog paddled nearby, eyes wide with fear and stress.

Meanwhile, Blaine and his Pokémon did their best to dodge the Sky Attacks Honchkrow and Skarmory had to offer them in rapid succession. Never one to run hiding, though, Blaine got fed up and drew the flail sheathed at his hip.

"Overheat!"

Magmortar and Ninetales erupted in a wave of scorching heat that blasted outwards for about thirty feet, forming an impenetrable dome that sent Honchkrow flying away and Skarmory screeching as its feathers were singed. He looked past the shimmering heat to where

Rosa was still riding Serperior and attempting to outpace Weavile.

Weavile slashed with Ice Punch, turning the very air to frost that zipped after Serperior. The grass snake hissed as the ice crystallized and bit into its flesh. Rosa swung back with her sword and hit Weavile's claw. The metal sparked and screamed against the Pokémon's sharp talons, and with a crunching motion, Weavile ripped through the metal and tore it clean in half. Rosa cried out in rage and threw the sword out along with Weavile with all her might, nearly losing her grip on Serperior's neck. Weavile's free claw made a last grab at Serperior just as Rosa flung it away and tore into Serperior's leathery flesh. Three thick crags ripped open beneath its nails and burst with blood, causing the great snake to screech again and veer. Its leafy tail smacked Weavile and sent it flying, along with Rosa's broken sword, until it skidded in the sand and rolled into the bay.

Omastar swam Lily to shore, where her blood ran freely down her left arm. She couldn't move it, not even the fingers. Gritting her teeth, she tried to blink the salty water from her eyes and dispel the stinging sensation. But Gyarados rose in the water again behind her, this time with Marco perched upon its crown. He looked down on her, silver eye vacant and merciless. The Chimera tech embedded in his head wriggled, and a few drops of blood trickled from his gouged out eye socket.

It's controlling him, Lily realized. *But why?*

"Fire Blast!" Blaine barked somewhere behind her.

Magmortar and Ninetales erupted with blue fire that rocketed up to Gyarados's head. Skarmory and Honchkrow flew back to Marco to escape the fire, squawking, and Marco lifted a hand in the air. The birds circled in front of him and beat their heavy wings in perfect synchronicity. The Mirror Move caught the double Fire Blast just before it could hit Gyarados's face. The flames ricocheted forty-five degrees skyward and dissipated into smoke, harmless. Just then, Weavile emerged from the water on a column of ice and rose to Marco's level, where it joined him atop Gyarados's head. Lily scrambled to her feet with Pikachu and stared up at the water Dragon.

But Marco wasn't paying attention to her anymore. He pointed at Blaine. "Hyper Beam."

Gyarados reared and powered up another Hyper Beam attack, this one more massive than the first, and aimed directly for Blaine. The old

Gym Leader backed up and reached for Ninetales, but the fox was a good distance away from him. Lily ran, Pikachu hot on her heels, and reached for Gyarados, desperate like she'd never been before.

"No!" she screamed.

Gyarados's red eyes narrowed to bloody slits, and for a split second she was sure it was looking right at her, through her, a measly human with no business telling a sea monster what to do.

"Stop!" she cried out, tears in her eyes and pain gnawing at her left arm like wildfire.

Gyarados shot its Hyper Beam, and Ninetales was still ten feet away from Blaine, large paws pounding the earth and just as desperate as Lily was. The Hyper Beam zigzagged out of Gyarados's gaping maw, poised to strike Blaine dead in less than the three seconds it would take Ninetales to reach the aged Gym Leader and spirit him to safety. But it never hit its mark.

Lily followed the bolt's arc with her eyes as it swept through the night sky and struck the earth a good two hundred feet off the mark. Gyarados swiveled its head at the last second and sent the attack awry for no good reason. Marco's mouth hung open in shock at the sudden change of plans. And Ninetales made it to Blaine and scooped him up onto its back.

"Gyarados!" Marco shouted.

Lily trembled with the pain that plagued her body, right hand still raised against Gyarados, and felt its murderous eyes on her again, watching. It ignored Marco completely as it focused on her.

"*Dragons and their descendants can't defy a fully realized Titan.*"

Steven's words echoed in her head as clear as the day he'd uttered them like a warning. Marco was still in shock as Gyarados loomed high over the bay and continued to peer down at Lily, waiting for something.

I... I can control it?

The earth began to rumble underfoot all of a sudden, and the staring contest broke. Rosa and Blaine were regrouping on land, but a new face appeared on the battlefield. Ariana stood by his side.

"Giovanni," she said. "You're just in time."

"Get out of my way, Ariana."

Giovanni was flanked by a pair of towering Kangaskhan and Rhydon that pulled together and stampeded toward Blaine and Rosa. Magmortar bellowed and prepared to meet the bulky enemies head on, while Blaine reared Ninetales around and tossed out another Pokéball. A fluffy Flareon appeared and ran to help Magmortar.

The earth rumbled again, and rock spires shot out from below the sand and dirt to escape the subterranean Earthquake attacks. Rosa and Serperior parted, and she tripped and rolled as the ground split apart beneath her. In the commotion, Lily saw her chance.

"Gyarados!" she shouted up at the water Dragon. "Throw him!"

Giovanni whipped around just in time to see the red Gyarados roar and whip its head over Marco's shocked protestations. He went flying, and Weavile along with him, through the air.

"Marco!" Giovanni shouted, running.

But his Pokémon were otherwise engaged as Magmortar and Flareon teamed up for a double Flamethrower. Marco tumbled through the air alongside Weavile, but his two Flyers swooped in and scooped them up. Skarmory closed its steely talons around his spread arms and hauled him up, while Honchkrow ducked under Weavile and caught the somersaulting weasel on its back with an agitated squawk.

Lily backed up from the water's edge and ran along the coast, signaling Kingdra and Dragonair.

"Now, Scaly! Whirlpool!"

Dragonair sped over the water's surface toward Lily and Pikachu. Meanwhile, Kingdra sank underwater and yawned, churning the waters around it. They rose in a whipping vortex and lifted off the ocean's surface as a great tornado. The red Gyarados, large but slow, turned to face it just as the waterspout slammed into it. Gyarados roared as the rushing tides swirled around the length of its scaled body, trapping it. Dragonair slithered past Lily, light as air.

"ChuChu, Thunder!"

"No, Gyarados!" Marco sped toward his Gyarados on Skarmory's swift

wings.

Pikachu scampered in the shallow waters ahead of Lily and jumped onto Dragonair's back. The serpentine Dragon slithered through the air, the fins on its head spread like true wings, and Pikachu ran up the length of its body to its head. Gyarados thrashed in the Whirlpool's center, trapped but not for long. It snapped its massive jaws, nearly taking a bite out of Dragonair as it sailed past. Pikachu leaped from Dragonair's head and exploded into a thousand sparks that charged together and culminated in a lightning bolt as thick as any Hyper Beam.

At fifteen feet away, even the wild Thunder attack was a sure thing. Raw lightning merged with Kingdra's Whirlpool and dragged over Gyarados's body like a hundred coiling snakes. Unable to withstand the pressure, the Whirlpool burst and sent a thick wave of electrified water out in all directions along the column of Gyarados's body. Skarmory squawked and reared back, spreading its wings to shield Marco from the blast. Electrified water hit it in the back and sent it reeling through the sky.

Gyarados let out an agonizing roar, suspended for a few moments in the air. Its tough scales were charred with streaks of black. Electricity burns swelled in ugly welts over the little exposed flesh, around the eyes and gills and inside the mouth. Rivulets of liquid ran down in between its scales, blood or water, it was impossible to tell against its natural crimson coloring. Gyarados teetered and fell to the side, and its long body hit the water with a great splash that sent a small tidal wave washing over the shore. Lily lost her balance and fell back on her rear as the water rushed past her.

Omastar swam to her now flooded side, able to move much faster in water than on land, and clicked its beak underwater, making bubbles as it looked up at her. Lily could hardly breathe, still shaking from the adrenaline pumping through her system and momentarily dulling the pain in her left arm. A low rumble was the only warning she got when a Dugtrio poked its three heads out of the sand beyond the water's reach and grunted at her.

"Nauty!" she screamed in fear.

Omastar wriggled its tentacles in warning, but the Earthquake attack was already heading straight for her and kicking up sand and water in its wake. She struggled to her feet, tried to back up deeper into the water, but it was too fast.

"Frenzy Plant!" Rosa shouted.

All of a sudden, the ground near Dugtrio split open and a massive tree root burst forth with a will of its own. It arced low over the earth and made to impale Dugtrio, but the mole Pokémon was fast and slipped underground again. Another root emerged and speared the ground, followed by another and another and another, until the entire beach was ground to gravel. The sentient roots swam through the earth like sea serpents, diving and reemerging.

The Earthquake never hit Lily, and she fell back on her rear again, trembling in fear. Dragonair and Pikachu slithered up behind her, and Kingdra floated a little ways off in the deeper water.

"Oh my god..."

Rosa and Serperior were destroying the entire battlefield. The grass snake's red eyes glowed white as it commanded the monstrous tree roots from the epicenter of the destruction. Marco and Weavile had landed safely and he jumped with his Pokémon high into the air just as a tree root burst underneath where he'd been standing. Skarmory swooped in and caught him on its back. Giovanni shouted something, but Kangaskhan and Rhydon were too slow to outpace the Frenzy Plant and were forced to retreat from their fight with Blaine's Pokémon. The two Dugtrio popped up, but wherever they showed their faces, Serperior's attack was not far behind.

Blaine was not about to let a few roots deter him. Still riding Ninetales, he directed the huge fox to leap onto one of the roots and ran over its length, lithe and agile.

"Will-O-Wisp!"

Ninetales's many tails billowed out behind it and pulsed with eerie ghostfire that trailed behind it. The roots caught fire but continued to move according to Serperior's bidding.

"There!" Rosa had one hand flat on the ground and the other pressed against Serperior's leafy hide.

Understanding without any further need of explanation, Serperior refocused its might and hissed. With a cringe-worthy squeal, one of the Dugtrio took a searching root in the face and plunged below ground. The thick root, aflame, pushed it deeper and deeper until it stopped and didn't move any further. There was no further sign of Dugtrio.

Flareon followed Ninetales's lead and leaped on top of one of the roots. It ducked its head and its fur sparked with embers that built into a blue Flare Blitz as Flareon picked up speed. Kangaskhan growled when it saw the attack coming, but it tripped over the debris underfoot and was too clumsy to dodge. Flareon hit the armored kangaroo square in the chest, cracking the protective plating and sending it hurtling backwards. Blaine whizzed by on Ninetales and swung his flail, which caught Kangaskhan mercilessly in the cheek. The spiked ball ripped out a chunk of flesh from its face with a *squelch* and cracked the bone underneath. Kangaskhan lost its balance and fell onto its back, howling in pain and dazed. The fire took to its flesh and slowly began to melt it where it had landed.

Giovanni, meanwhile, cut his losses and tried to get to Rosa. He had a curved sword in hand and a mind to use it as he ran in bursts, careful to keep an eye on the now flaming Frenzy Plant roots. Lily gasped.

"Rosa, look out!"

Rosa looked up, but before Giovanni could get to her, a Pokéball broke open in his path and revealed a towering Meganium. At its full height, the flowering dinosaur was a couple feet taller than Giovanni, and its stout stature was no small trifle. It stamped the ground with a calloused foot and created a small crater. The petals around its neck quivered in threat.

"Hello again."

Giovanni looked to his left, but all he got was a fist in his face that sent him staggering backwards and tripping over a root. His sword scattered out of his hand and disappeared among the debris. Lyra shook out her fist and glared down at him.

"You're going to pay for that. Dugtrio!"

Giovanni's last Dugtrio poked its heads above ground and induced another Earthquake. A tree root was quick to come down on it, but the mole Pokémon slipped underground and escaped. The ground shook, but Lyra didn't care. She leaned down and hauled Giovanni up bodily by his collar to her eye level.

"I'd finish you off myself, but I won't take that away from Marco."

Giovanni grinned, and blood from her punch dyed his teeth red. "Stupid girl, you really don't understand. Marco, help me!"

A whistling sound overhead was Lyra's only warning when a Honchkrow swooped in, talons bared, and made a grab for her. Lyra released Giovanni and fell back just as Honchkrow dug its claws into her right forearm and hauled with all its might. Lyra screamed as she was lifted off the ground a few feet, then dropped against a root that was aflame. Her hair singed and she rolled over the ground. Meganium lowered its head for a Slam attack, but Dugtrio's Earthquake forced it back with the threat of rock fingers that suddenly shot out of the ground, giving him enough time to retreat.

"Marco!"

Ethan, no longer riding Girafarig, ran among the writhing roots toward Marco, who was flying overhead on his Skarmory.

"Marco, it's me!"

Marco spared him a glance and swooped down closer to the earth. Ethan faltered, but it was not a warm greeting he received.

"Ice Punch!"

Weavile jumped from Skarmory's back, left claw curled and frosted with ice. Ethan stumbled back in shock and fumbled for a Pokéball at his hip.

"Hyper Voice!" Ethan shouted.

A squat Politoed appeared and opened its mouth in a sonic scream. The sound waves hit Weavile as it hurtled to the earth and threw it off course, where it rolled in the sand.

"Marco, what the hell're you doing? It's me!"

But Marco and Skarmory were speeding off toward the bay, where the red Gyarados lay stunned and bleeding in the shallows. Ethan chased after him with Politoed.

Lily was back on her feet with a hand on Dragonair for support. The red Gyarados was passed out and still sparking, its head on the shore and mouth agape while the waves washed blood from the oozing sores in its mouth. Its breathing was labored and made a wheezing sound, and its eyes were dilated and glazed with pain and exhaustion. She cast it a sorrowful glance, guilty at how she'd handled it, but at least it couldn't rampage anymore.

"Steel Wing!"

Pikachu squeaked in terror and Lily looked up just as Marco and his Skarmory swooped in with intent to kill. She barely had time to scream when Omastar shot up out of the water, retracted into its spiky shell, and took the attack head on. Dragonair whisked Lily out to sea away from the danger, and Omastar went flying.

"Nauty!"

Omastar crashed into the water with a splash, but once the waters settled again, there was no sign of it. Overhead, Marco pulled up on Skarmory and arced around for another attack. He stood up on the bird's back, somehow able to balance without the aid of a saddle or straps, and fixed his lone silver eye on Lily. In one hand, he held a Pokéball that recalled the red Gyarados. In the other, he carried a knife. Skarmory squawked menacingly and swooshed over the water's surface toward Lily and Dragonair. Before she had time even to think about being afraid for her life all over again, he let the knife fly.

The water around her began to swirl, and a thick column of water flung Lily, Dragonair, and Pikachu, who was clinging to her ponytail for dear life, high into the air. Kingdra watched its trainer from the center of the waterspout, powering it to keep her afloat and out of the path of danger.

The pressure on Lily's injuries made her vision blur with tears, and for every breath she managed to steal, she earned a mouthful of seawater in turn. Marco and Skarmory flew higher, intent on catching her. He drew two more knives. With what strength remained to her, Lily held onto Dragonair. The water fell below them, and for a split second, she was suspended in midair clinging to her two Pokémon as a pair of throwing knives zoomed toward her with zero chance of missing their target.

Choking on seawater, Lily shouted, "Dragon Pulse!"

Dragonair wrapped around itself in a tight coil and released a burst of red energy in all directions. It hit the knives just feet from their mark, warping the metal and throwing them off course. The wave kept going and hit Skarmory, too, but not before Marco jumped from the bird's back to avoid the blast. Skarmory took the secondary hit and spiraled toward the shallows, where it crash-landed and skidded through sea and shore. But the energy also slammed into Lily and Pikachu, and she couldn't hold onto Dragonair any longer.

Buffeted back with enough force to dislocate her good shoulder and snap her head around so hard the only reason she was sure it hadn't broken was the fact that she was still alive, Lily screamed and hurtled through the air toward the frothing sea below. Pikachu still clung to her ponytail, sparking in fear and sending tiny electrocutions all over her body. There was a moment as she fell, just a small, quiet moment, when it all washed away, the pain, the fear, the feeling that even after all she'd accomplished today, it still wasn't enough in the end. How could it be? She was only a scientist, not a fighter like Ivy or Rosa. She wasn't tactical like Gary, or seasoned like Blaine.

"*You're just a little girl with pretty fantasies of a world that never existed."*

She watched as the stars fell away from her and hid behind roiling, purple night clouds. They were so far away, but she reached for them anyway. But it was the misty clouds that reached back, and they called to her in a voice that existed in that world she fantasized about even now.

"I gotcha!"

The mists parted and revealed a hand that closed around her injured arm and pulled her close. A head of black hair and blazing, red eyes drew close to her face, shouted her name, but she could barely see him through her tears.

She couldn't move, but he did the work for her and wrapped his arms around her, drowning them both in a violet fog. And through it all, though she couldn't see or think of anything but the pain, she focused on his voice shouting in her ear.

"I gotcha, Lily!"

They crashed into the water a hundred feet below in an impact that felt like hitting concrete. Water filled her mouth and crept down her throat and she gagged, but something firm pushed her back to the surface against the tide. Arms held her in place, and her vision swam. Her feet dangled helplessly as though over a ledge, but soon they bumped something soft and dragged until there was nothing between them and the sandy shore. She coughed, suddenly remembering she'd swallowed seawater instead of air, and blinked the sting of salt from her eyes. The pain of her injuries came back two-fold, but the face staring down at her was the happiest sight she'd seen in all her life.

"Lily," Ash said. "Hey, you're okay, I gotcha."

Blastoise squatted beside him dripping water and peered down at her over Ash's shoulder. A purple miasma cloaked him and gathered into a roughly humanoid shape over his shoulders. The unfamiliar Ghost smiled down at Lily in a toothless grin that dripped tar onto Ash's back.

"Ghosts're pretty amazing, huh?" she said weakly, trying her best to smile for him.

Color filled his cheeks along red streaks like someone had raked their fingers through his skin, and diluted blood dripped down the side of his head. His hair was uneven and singed in places under his ratty, red cap. These thoughts raced through her sharp mind at a mile a minute.

Tears gathered in his eyes and he lifted her off the sand into a fierce hug. "Yeah, they definitely are."

Lily's breath hitched on a sob as she breathed him in, a briny musk of sweat and blood and soot, but still familiar enough to stir that involuntary feeling of safety and warmth she got around him. Their two Pikachu, ever at their trainers' sides through thick and thin, huddled together on the beach with their tails erect and noses to the air on lookout.

"Can you stand?"

He helped her to her feet, and she cried out. Both arms were useless. "My shoulder, I can't move it."

Ash took a second to examine her right shoulder and wrapped a hand around it. He placed his other hand around the back of her neck. "This is gonna hurt."

With one swift motion, he popped the joint back into place and was rewarded with a brief string of expletives that Ivy might have been proud of. The pain soon dissipated, and Lily tried moving her subordinate hand. Dragonair, moving sluggishly, emerged from the water with Kingdra, who was pushing Omastar with its nose. The Spiral Pokémon's shell was badly cracked, and it had withdrawn inside it, but it was still alive. Lily kneeled down to accept Omastar from Kingdra, ran her finger over one of cracks, and recalled Omastar to its Pokéball with the promise of care later.

"That's two of my Pokémon down," Lily said. "And me, if you hadn't shown up."

Ash's gaze was far away. "We've all needed someone to help us get back up today."

Mismagius hovered above Ash, its wide-brimmed head a bit like a lady's sun hat, its luminous, red eyes anything but lady like. Lily wondered about Gengar briefly, but her questions would have to wait until later once they were out of danger. Above, a thinned flock of Charizard still assaulted Team Rocket's aerial forces, but the latter group was beginning to dwindle in number and the orange lizards had taken to raining fire on the grounded soldiers. Perhaps the end of all this really was near.

"C'mon," Ash said. "Tell me what's goin' on here so we can get ridda Team Rocket for good."

Giovanni, having recovered, was still trying to get past Lyra to take out Rosa, but she and Meganium were giving him a hard time of it. With Kangaskhan dead and Rhydon still grappling with Magmortar, he had only one Pokémon left. The sleek Persian emerged from its Pokéball, and Meganium scoffed at it, stamping the ground with its foot. The Frenzy Plant roots seemed to avoid Meganium despite their erratic churn all around.

"Hey Rosa, hurry it up!" Lyra called.

Rosa said nothing as she and Serperior continued to search for the other Dugtrio. It was fast underground, too fast to pin down easily. As soon as it popped up somewhere, it was gone just as fast before Frenzy Plant could trap it. Serperior was growing tired from keeping up the attack for so long, and the frosty Slash it had suffered from Weavile earlier was still wet with blood and starting to congeal and smell.

"I need more time!"

"You don't have anymore time," Giovanni spat. "Slash!"

Persian hissed and shot forward like greased lightning. Meganium didn't even see it coming and suffered a terrible gash over its chest. A couple fleshy petals were ripped to shreds, and blood splattered the ground. Meganium let out a fearful honking noise and tried to backpedal. Lyra threw another Pokéball, and her Stantler came out running.

"Stomp!"

Stantler stampeded toward Persian, who took off running trying to dodge the powerful attack. Meganium, meanwhile whipped up a Leaf Storm despite its injuries. Instead of running, however, Giovanni sank to the ground and rapped it with his knuckles. From out of nowhere, Dugtrio burst out of the ground and hurled a Mud Shot at Meganium. The goop smacked most of the leaves Meganium had whipped up out of the air and neutralized the attack, while more of it hit Lyra directly and knocked her off balance. She caught herself on her hands and rolled to redistribute the impact and save herself some injury.

All of a sudden, a particularly thick tree root broke ground and shot toward Dugtrio. The mole Pokémon attempted to burrow again, but this time Serperior was ready. Three more roots snaked toward Dugtrio, and the Frenzy Plant attack converged. Stantler was separated from Persian and forced to double back. Dugtrio barely slipped below ground when it squealed in pain. The roots impaled it one after the other below ground before breaking the surface again, coated in blood and dust. Dugtrio tried to set off one last Earthquake, but another root came down on top of its three heads and buried it.

With the two elusive Dugtrio finally dead, Serperior dispelled the Frenzy Plant and slumped over, exhausted. Rosa swayed on her feet, one hand still on Serperior's back, and looked around. The entire battlefield for about a mile in all directions was completely razed.

Giovanni gritted his teeth in fury. No one had ever bested one, let alone both of his Dugtrio. He searched around for Marco, who was too far away near the beach, but he did find Ariana still standing among the rubble. Beyond the destruction at the beach, the fight was starting to wind down as the corpses outnumbered those still fighting, but he saw far more Fire-type Pokémon still standing than he cared to admit. The ground still rumbled intermittently with the results of Dugtrio's efforts, and he cast a brief look at Mt. Cinnabar, whose sides continued to crumble. He took a brief second to weigh his limited options.

"Persian!"

The cat was at his side in an instant, having outrun Stantler in circles. He then recalled Rhydon without warning, and Magmortar's Fire Punch ate dust, causing the rotund Pokémon to lose its balance and face plant. Giovanni took off at a run now that the tree roots were shriveling and no longer tearing up the ground, Persian loping by his side. Lyra watched, aghast.

"Stop!" she shouted, running after him.

"Boss," Ariana said when they joined up. "I've got us a way off this island." She showed him a Pokéball.

"Not without my son."

Elsewhere on the beach, Marco had not fallen to his death, but was instead caught by Ethan's Typhlosion. With the near-dead Skarmory back in its Pokéball, Marco faced Ethan with only a knife in hand and one last Pokéball at his belt.

"Marco, stop! What happened to you? You hate Team Rocket *and* your deadbeat dad! Stop fucking around!"

"I *am* Team Rocket," Marco said, voice devoid of any emotion to prove or disprove the declaration. "And you're in my way."

"It's that thing on your face," Ethan said as they circled each other. "That's the same Chimera tech we've been seein' Team Rocket use on Pokémon."

"I won't warn you again," Marco said. "Get out of my way, or I'll kill you." He brandished a knife at Ethan to prove his point.

Ethan was silent a moment and clenched his fists. "Marco, I know you can hear me in there. You gotta snap out of it, man!"

Typhlosion smoldered and snapped its jaws at Ethan's side, while Politoed balanced on its hind legs, nervous.

"He can't snap out of it."

Ethan whirled just a second too late, and Giovanni's punch smacked him in the chest. Pain exploded in his collarbone as he heard the bone snap through his armor and he reeled around, led by his abused shoulder. Typhlosion refocused its fury on Giovanni, but the man was ready with a Pokéball and released his Rhydon. It towered over Typhlosion, an imposing enemy despite the char marks in its skin where Magmortar's punches had taken their toll. The horn on Rhydon's snout began to spin like a drill, and it roared in warning as Typhlosion hissed and spit at it. Politoed hopped to Ethan's side as he struggled on the ground.

"Fuck," Ethan winced in pain as he tried to sit up without exacerbating

the crippling pain in his chest and shoulder.

"Marco, we must leave," Giovanni said, holding out a hand to his son.

Ethan looked between the two of them. "No, get away from him! Poli, use Bubblebeam!"

Politoed spat out a stream of bubbles at Giovanni, but Persian leaped and swatted them away with its tail. It then descended on Politoed, intent on chasing it down and tearing it to shreds.

A clamoring sound in the distance grew louder, where a group of Rocket Agents and JRM rebels had organized a retreat as slews of Charizard blasted them with Flamethrowers from above. The soldiers fired crossbows and ordered their Pokémon to fight back with Thunrderbolts, Vine Whips, and Rock Throws. A couple Charizard were hit and crashed to the earth, but the CATs had the advantage and drove the enemy farther toward the shore.

"Son," Giovanni said again. "We'll finish this another day, I promise you."

"Yes, Father." Marco approached Giovanni.

"No!" Ethan ripped another Pokéball from his belt and released Jolteon. "Stop him!"

Jolteon's fur needled with static electricity, but Marco positioned himself in between Giovanni and the electric feline. Ethan hesitated.

"Move, Marco! That asshole has to die for what he did!"

"I won't let you hurt my father."

"I don't need your permission."

Marco turned at the sound of her voice, but no one had seen or heard Ivy coming. Wounded and tired from the long hours of near constant battle and emotional trauma, she nevertheless had found a discarded bludgeon and called on whatever strength remained to her and swung it hard against Giovanni's back. The Rocket Boss crumpled to the ground face first, where his nose cracked on the packed earth and he let out a strangled cry of pain.

Ethan gaped, momentarily forgetting the agony that squeezed him like a giant's fist. Where the hell had that girl come from? A hand on his

good arm lifted him off the ground and alleviated the pressure on his broken collarbone, and he found himself staring up at the severe, sour face of someone he wasn't sure he'd ever see again.

"Gary?" he blurted out.

Gary looped Ethan's good arm around his shoulder and lifted them both up to stand. "Idiot. You can't even move and you're still talking shit."

Despite himself, Ethan couldn't ignore the wash of relief he felt knowing Gary was here on their side. "Yeah, well, you were always the better head, and I was always the better fist."

Jolteon remained at Ethan's side, sparking in agitation, while Politoed had somehow managed to outmaneuver Persian and hopped over rubble to return to Ethan. Upon seeing Jolteon, as well as Gary's Espeon, Persian skidded to a halt and didn't come any closer.

Typhlosion was still having trouble with Rhydon. The big, grey beast slammed its head into the ground, where its Horn Drill liquefied the earth and churned it to shreds, barely missing. Typhloshion roared and jumped up on Rhydon's back, attempting to bite through its tough hide with Fire Fang but to little avail. Rhydon lurched and tried to throw it off. In a flash of light, something just as big as Rhydon crashed into it from the left, knocking both Rhydon and Typhlosion down. A Tyranitar looking worse for wear but incensed enough to fight through its injuries slammed its tail on the ground and roared. Typhlosion rolled and dug its claws into the ground on Rhydon's other side, while Rhydon struggled to its feet between the two of them.

Marco stood between Giovanni, who was groaning on the ground as he tried to stop the blood flow from his nose, and Ivy, who'd gone still in shock.

"Marco," Ivy gasped, her voice cracking.

Marco said nothing as he stared back at her, knife in hand. That was how Ariana and a handful of Rocket Agents found them, but when she saw the odds, she held her forces back, wary.

"Marco, what did they do to you?" Ivy said, horrified.

Dread pooled in the pit of Gary's stomach as he watched. "That's Marco? But Ivy said he was the one trying to stop Team Rocket."

Ethan grumbled. "He was. We all were, me and Marco and Lyra. But when we found out he's the Boss's son, Giovanni decided to kidnap him. Guess Marco didn't wanna cooperate, so he put that tech in his head. Son of a bitch."

Even hearing the truth was enough to draw bile to Gary's throat. He eyed the tech embedded in Marco's head, the dried blood that ran down his ear and from his hollowed out eye socket. Cruel didn't begin to cover it. "So he can't control himself. But that means... Ivy! Get away from him!"

Ivy ignored him and held out the knife she'd drawn to her side. "Marco, it's me. You know me." Her voice shook with the tears she tried in vain to keep at bay as she recognized the tech in his head.

"Kill her!" Giovanni spat. "Do it now, Son!"

"Son," Ivy repeated. "Oh my god..."

Lyra ran toward the group with her Stantler, and Rosa and Blaine were with her. Ariana spotted them and signaled to her soldiers, who cut them off with the threat of force.

"Marco!" Lyra shouted when she saw him from a distance.

Not long after, Ash and Lily approached from the direction of the bay, flanked by Blastoise and Dragonair and their two Pikachu. They moved slowly, like every step was a bare foot over hot coals. They, too, stopped abruptly at the sight of Giovanni on the ground and the standoff between Ivy and a reticent Marco.

Ivy dropped her knife and swallowed hard. "It doesn't matter, whatever's happened doesn't matter."

She approached, but Marco pointed his knife at her. "Stop."

"Kill her, damnit!" Giovanni struggled to his knees but continued to shake from the blow Ivy had dealt him with the bludgeon.

"Ivy!" Lily screamed, her face a mask of fear watching Ivy face Marco's knife.

"Get back, he can't control himself!" Gary shouted.

Ivy ignored them both and eyed the machine eating through the entire left side of Marco's face. "You promised me the next time we saw each

other, it'd be to put an end to this once and for all. It's everything we've been fighting for, don't you remember?"

Marco's hand shook as he brandished the knife at her.

Giovanni struggled with something fastened to his armored thigh and tried to tug it free.

"I know you can hear me in there." She reached over the knife for the tech on his face, but he was too far away. "Marco, please."

He began to lower the knife, and Ivy took another halting step forward. He blinked, and his lone silver eye dilated. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his hand continued to shake.

Gary hauled Ethan forward, his stomach twisted in a knot of dread. The tension in the air was as thick as molasses on the back of his tongue, and he found it hard to breathe. Echoes of the Miracle Eye whispers lingered in his head, making it hard to think straight, like flies buzzing in his ears. Espeon brushed up against his leg, sensing his inner turmoil, but his feet were heavy and unwilling to move.

"Ivy..." Marco said, his voice strained.

She smiled through her tears and reached for the ghastly machine in his head, gently so as not to spook him. Giovanni managed to get the small computer he'd been struggling with and punched a few buttons.

"Kill her *now*!"

The Chimera tech in Marco's head wriggled its many tentacles and leaked fresh blood from his ear as it burrowed deeper. Marco snapped to attention as though controlled by invisible strings and stopped shaking. Before Ivy could react, he lunged at her and drove his knife through her belly, in between the plated armor that was scuffed and slashed from her previous fights, past two ribs and through soft tissue and sinewy muscle to the hilt. Ivy jerked unnaturally, her mouth twisted open in shock and pain, eyes wide and trained on Marco's.

Lily screamed and sank to her knees. Ash looked on, stunned frozen. Marco twisted the knife, and Ivy sputtered as she tried to suck in a rattling breath. His gaze was hard and unfeeling as the machine in his head paralyzed everything but the will to obey. And yet, tears fell from his good eye as freely as blood fell from the one he no longer had, even as he tore the knife from Ivy's belly and let her fall.

"Shit, Marco! No!" Ethan shouted.

Blaine pushed past his female escorts and commanded Magmortar to Fire Blast directly into the line of Rocket Agents Ariana had gathered, taking advantage of the chaos. A Furret caught fire and screeched, running down the line of Agents and spreading the blue flames to everything it bumped in the few seconds before it burned to death. Lyra climbed on Stantler's back and rushed through the flames.

Giovanni was on his feet clutching the mini computer that he used to control Marco in his hand. He was shouting something at his Persian. Marco dropped his knife.

Gary had lost his grip on Ethan the minute he watched Marco drive his knife through Ivy. The screams, the stench of death and burning skin, all of it fell behind him as though someone had lowered a curtain around him. He watched as Ivy staggered backward, clutching her bleeding stomach, and lurched. His feet carried him and his mind followed, pulled this way and that by the lingering voices in his head —Sabrina, his grandfather, Koga, Will, and even Ivy herself.

"*We're all monsters."*

Gary sprinted at Marco and rammed him with a vicious tackle that sent them both falling. Stunned, Marco tried to fight back and scratched at Gary's face and neck, but he barely felt the pain. He squeezed Marco's throat and wrapped his fingers under the tech that continued to burrow into Marco's skull.

"No, get off!" Giovanni shouted.

But Lyra's Stantler ran fearlessly into the fold and rammed Giovanni with its curved antlers. One of the sharpened points found a break in Giovanni's armor under his left armpit and pierced clean through the shoulder.

Gary pulled with all his might, and Marco clawed at him mercilessly. He got in a good punch to Gary's stomach, but still Gary wouldn't relent. Teeth gritted and seeing red, he yanked and heaved until the tentacles began to squirm and the blood started flowing. Soon, Marco began screaming and tried to pry Gary's hands free, but Gary closed his fingers tighter around Marco's throat. With a final pull, he ripped free the Chimera tech and hauled it back over his shoulder. The foot-long tentacles sprayed blood in their wake as they flew out of his hand and landed in the dirt a ways off. Marco convulsed under Gary, his good eye squeezed shut and moist with tears, while his hands went to

his bloody face and covered his ripped up eye socket, moaning in pain.

A jet of water blasted over Gary's head and slammed into a Rocket Agent that came too close with a curved blade.

"Gary!"

Ash and Blastoise were running to catch up with him, and his voice snapped Gary out of his rage-induced stupor. He let go of Marco and crawled off him as quickly as he could, reviled, until he heard a soft sucking sound behind him.

Ivy was on her back, still clutching her stomach, and coughing pitifully. Tyranitar was still fighting Rhydon with Ethan's Typhlosion, but together they proved too much for the behemoth rhino and would soon overpower it. Tyranitar grabbed Rhydon's spinning horn and yanked it so hard it snapped off. Rhydon roared and fell to one knee, and Typhlosion jumped on its back again and began digging claws and teeth into the back of its neck.

"Ivy." Gary was hovering at her side in an instant. His hand went to her stomach, where blood was seeping from between her fingers. "No, Ivy, c'mon."

She tried to speak, but only her gasping breath came out. Those big, blue eyes normally so sure and confident were dilated and glazed as they seemed to look through him, unseeing. Unable to control himself, Gary's vision blurred with tears and he watched them fall onto her dirty face and paint clean tracks down her cheeks.

"Hold on, I gotta Hyper Potion." Ash skidded to Ivy's other side and pushed her hands away to spray the knife wound with the glistening medicine.

Lily was at his side, sobbing as he laid a hand on Ivy's forehead. "Oh, Ivy."

"It's not working," Gary said, anger rising with the intensity of his tears. "She's still bleeding. Why the fuck isn't it working?"

He glared between Ash and Lily, and she jumped. "I don't..."

"Do something!" Gary snapped at her. "You're the genius, save her!"

Lily shuddered with a renewed wave of sobs. "I-I can't save the dead!"

"She's *not* dead!" Gary put pressure on Ivy's wound to staunch the bleeding and searched her eyes. They were still open, and she was still struggling to breathe. "She's alive, you're still alive. Ivy!"

Blaine had set his Fire Pokémon loose against Team Rocket's remaining forces. The battlefield was ablaze, and his Magmortar and Flareon made short work of the scrambling enemy forces. Rhydon lay dead and burning, and Persian was doing its best to protect Giovanni from harm, but it bore a deep gash in its right flank that was slowing it down. Ethan made it to Marco, who was screaming on the ground and rolling, still clutching his ruined face.

"Marco, it's me, Ethan! Hey, Marco!"

Lyra joined them and put a hand under Marco's shoulders. She fished a Super Potion from the utility pouch strapped to her thigh. "Hold his wrists. This is gonna sting," she warned before spraying its contents all over Marco's bloody eye socket and ear.

He screamed and thrashed, but Ethan did his best to hold him down with his good arm and grunted in pain when his broken collarbone and shoulder were jostled. Politoed and Jolteon tried their best to hold Marco's feet so he wouldn't kick Ethan.

The Super Potion worked fast, and soon the bleeding had stopped and the wounds began to clot. Lyra continued to spray, and Marco mumbled incoherently in her arms. A flurry of flapping wings landed nearby. Honchkrow and Weavile stood at Marco's feet, beaten and bloody, but still standing and unsure what to do. Without Marco to command them, they had no reason to move against Ethan and Lyra.

"His eye," Lyra said.

Ethan eyed Honchkrow and Weavile, almost resentful of the way they'd turned on them despite all the time they'd spent together. "He's alive, ain't he?"

In a matter of seconds, the Super Potion had mitigated the worst of the damage. Marco's face was streaked with blood, and the shock of the tech getting ripped from his head still hadn't worn off. Nevertheless, he forced open his good eye and blinked up at Lyra and Ethan.

"Ivy," he rasped. "Is... Is she...?"

"Oh, shit, that's right," Ethan said. "Lyra, he stabbed her and it looked bad."

Lyra looked over her shoulder at where Ivy lay prostrate on the ground surrounded by her friends. They were shouting at each other.

"But Marco—"

His hand closed around her wrist with such force that she dropped the empty Super Potion bottle. They locked gazes, and she gasped.

"Please," he begged. "Go."

Lyra blinked rapidly to dispel any tears that threatened to fall. She nodded. "I'll try."

He let her go, and Lyra got to her feet. She selected a Pokéball from her belt and tossed it, and jogged to where Ivy was bleeding out on the ground. Ash spotted her first.

"Who're you—"

"Stand back. I'm gonna help."

Without waiting, she muscled her way in between Ash and Lily. Her Blissey, a rotund, pink Pokémon with furry frills that decorated it like frosting on a cake was so out of place in the warzone that Gary actually forgot his anger for a moment. But when he saw Lyra shoving her way to Ivy, he set his jaw.

"What're you doing?" he demanded.

"Helping. Get out of the way."

"She's dying," Lily said. "The Hyper Potion didn't work."

"I got something a little stronger, but I need to move fast. Last chance, get out of my way."

Ash was the first to move and give Lyra some space, and Blissey took his spot. Lily followed his example and backed up to give them some room. Lyra looked at the knife wound and grimaced. Ivy was still alive, but she was hanging on by a thread and fading fast.

"Blissey?" Lyra held out a hand to her Pokémon.

Blissey fretted at the smell of blood and death, but it obeyed its trainer

and crouched on the ground. With its stubby front paws, it lifted the egg carefully nestled in the pouch on its swollen stomach and handed it to Lyra.

"Open her mouth."

Lily lifted Ivy's head and eased her jaw open, whereby Lyra cracked the small egg on her knee and dumped its contents into Ivy's mouth. The silvery liquid splashed the sides of Ivy's mouth, and she immediately choked on it.

"She has to swallow it!" Lyra pulled back to avoid spilling any more of the strange potion.

Lily tried to hold Ivy's head still and rubbed her throat with her good hand, forcing Ivy to swallow.

It went down slowly, and Lyra poured more of the egg's contents into Ivy's mouth, a little at a time. The more Ivy drank, the more violently she shook.

"What's happening?" Ash said. "She looks like she's got a bad reaction."

"Just hold her down!"

Gary pushed down on Ivy's shoulders, abandoning the wound in her belly. Lyra tossed out the empty eggshells and held down Ivy's legs. Silvery foam bubbled in Ivy's mouth, and her eyes rolled back in their sockets.

"Ivy!" he shouted, desperate.

All of a sudden, she fell completely still and sagged. Her eyes drifted shut and her tongue lolled. Lyra set her jaw and stole a glance at Blissey.

"Ivy?" Gary shook her a little.

"Is she...?" Ash trailed off.

Lily said nothing and continued to weep softly.

Gary moved his hands to Ivy's face and wiped away the excess liquid and foam around her mouth. Lyra watched him, suddenly exhausted, and her heart broke.

"Ivy," he said again, this time softer. He ran his thumbs over her

cheeks where his tears dripped onto her skin. "Come back. Come back to me."

Ash and his Pikachu looked on, silently crying but unable to do anything.

"Please, I need you," Gary said, still clutching her face. "I can't lose you, too. Ivy..."

Ivy remained limp in his arms, and Lily covered her mouth to stifle a fresh wave of tears.

Marla ducked her Charizard into a low sweep over the northern outskirts of town, where it let loose a Flamethrower on a group of JRM rebels' heads. They scattered, aflame, but they soon fell to their wounds. The sun was beginning to breach the horizon after a long day and night of constant fighting. The tide of battle had turned on the ground when someone had mustered the guts to electrocute the monstrous red Gyarados and end its terror on the northern beach. Even the sight of the colossal water Dragon transformed into a fifty-foot lightning rod was enough to boost morale.

Many of the Rocket and JRM Flyers who hadn't been killed had turned feather and fled back to their ships, only to find one of them sunk and burning and the other covered in ice and frozen solid in the water, making it impossible to sail. Marla sent a third of her remaining CATs after them to pick off the stragglers, while she led the rest in an aerial assault on the ground forces. With no way to defend against a rain of fire, the invaders' numbers plummeted and they began to scatter and retreat.

Marla herself led an attack on a group of Rocket Agents marching back to the northern shore, where Blaine was fighting.

"Fire!" she bellowed.

Her Charizard and the five that flew with her unleashed identical Flamethrowers perfectly in sync and drew a fiery path in the ground that plowed through the Rocket forces. She watched with grim satisfaction as trainers and Pokémon alike lost all sense of duty and order, more concerned with saving their own skins from a smoldering demise.

The radio in her ear buzzed, and a familiar but frazzled voice spoke to her. "Colonel, we've got a serious problem!"

"Nimbus, it can't be worse than the shit I'm dealing with outside," Marla said over the whipping winds.

Nimbus made a sputtering sound on the other end of the radio. "That's just it. Things are about to get *much* worse, and there's nothing I can do to stop—"

All of a sudden, Mt. Cinnabar *cracked* and its northern face began to crumble. Thick slabs of rock broke apart and started a rockslide down the volcano's face. Marla swore and reeled Charizard around. She pressed the radio in her ear with a finger.

"Nimbus! What the hell's going on? I've got a rockslide that just about took out the natural gas plant."

On the other side of the radio, she heard shuffling and static. After a couple seconds, Nimbus was back and panting. "It's just as I was trying to say! Whatever was causing that irregular seismic activity succeeded! Mt. Cinnabar's going to blow!"

Marla saw red for a moment. "That volcano's been dormant for decades. No fucking way *anything's* blowing today."

"But Ma'am, there's nothing I can do to—"

"Then figure it out! I'm getting Blaine. That volcano better not blow until I get there, you got that?"

"But—"

She ripped the radio out of her ear and tossed it. Her flinty eyes swept over the burning farmland and farther out toward the northern bay, where she'd seen Blaine fighting before. Even if they won this war, if that volcano blew, the whole island would perish.

"To me!" Marla shouted as she gestured sharply.

The other mounted Charizard resumed their formation, and she signaled for them to follow her as she swooped toward the beach and landed. Blaine was riding his Ninetales while Magmortar and Flareon wrought ruin and destruction.

"Grandfather!" Marla dismounted her Charizard and jogged toward Blaine. "We've got a big problem."

Mt. Cinnabar spewed a cloud of grey ash from its mouth just then,

followed by an ominous rumble. Blaine glared back at the volcano. "Begin the evacuation at the southern port. Use the CATs. This war's over. And get me a Charizard."

Marla was way ahead of him and handed him a Pokéball, which released a large Charizard already saddled. It snarled at the scent of fire and blood permeating the air, but one look from Blaine as he approached silenced the beast, and it lowered its head to his eye-level. He climbed onto Charizard's back and quickly recalled the rest of his Pokémon.

Marla cast a glance at the young people Blaine had been fighting alongside, recognizing Ash among them, though he was hunched over someone on the ground along with his friends. She pressed her lips together and turned back to her own Charizard and mounted up.

"Those kids can take care of themselves," Blaine said, kicking his Charizard into takeoff. "Get the civilians to the southern port!"

Marla took off after Blaine, her fleet of Charizard following close behind. Casting one last glance back at Ash and the others, she ignored the pang of concern and headed south. Mt. Cinnabar belched another cloud of ash, and it started to clog the air like grey snow. Marla lifted the scarf around her neck to keep the ashes out of her mouth and nose, and prayed for a miracle.

25. Cinnabar Island, Part 5

Triumvirate, chapter 25: Cinnabar Island, Part 5
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

An invisible demon with needles for teeth and breath like fire gnawed the left side of Marco's face. The Super Potion Lyra had given him did nothing for the pain, but it did stop the bleeding. What remained of his left eye and the inside of his left ear sloughed down his cheek like cottage cheese, blended to hell. Ethan was doing his best to keep him conscious and spraying him with what remained of the Super Potion, but his voice was cloudy and distant. It was like the entire left side of Marco's body had shut down—no sound, no sight, just the demon raking its needle teeth over his flesh and digging deep to his addled brain.

Worse than the physical agony were the memories. They swept over him too fast to sort through and comprehend, a blur of blood and violence. He saw the Cinnabarean soldiers he'd slaughtered, watched their faces twist in shock and fear as they breathed their last breaths and he moved on before they hit the ground. He saw Proton, felt his warm blood splatter his face. Worst of all, he saw Ivy, vividly even now, how she looked when he drove the knife into her on the whim of another.

So weak.

Tears stung his many facial lacerations, but he couldn't stop them as he pictured her falling again and again. The demon eating his face breathed fire along his skin, and he almost welcomed the unbearable burn to forget the look in Ivy's eyes when his steel drove in between her ribs and twisted.

"Marco, can you hear me?" Ethan said.

He sounded so far away, but Ethan's good hand set down the Super Potion bottle and pushed Marco's sweaty bangs out of his eyes. He tried to focus.

"Hey man, wake up!"

"Ethan..."

Two familiar faces looked down at him across from Ethan. Honchkrow sniffed the blood soaking his hair and its beak came away red. It

shifted uneasily on its feet. Weavile stood beside it, its natural chill welcome against the burning in his face.

"Shit, he's getting away," Ethan said.

Marco lifted a hand to his ruined face and covered his gouged out eye. Shaking, he cried out as he struggled into a sitting position. He wanted to ask who, but a flash of black armor in his vision followed by a streak of familiar red hair was all the answer he needed. Ariana tossed out a Pokéball, and a Fearow coalesced within the light. She got on and held out a hand for Giovanni, but the limping Rocket Boss cast Marco a final glance. There was fury in his eyes.

"This isn't over," he said, backing away and tossing a small computer on the ground.

Something inhuman took hold of Marco in that moment. The voices in his head of the people he'd murdered under that tiny computer's control seemed to renew their death throes all over again, and he couldn't stay on the ground a moment longer. Stifling a scream from the pain as he moved, he got to his feet.

"Dude," Ethan said, also struggling to stand but hunched unnaturally as he clutched his shoulder.

"Giovanni!" Ariana said. "We have to go, *now*!"

Giovanni bared his teeth and glared at Marco, hesitant, but he backed up and reached for Fearow's saddle. Propelled by a mystical rage, Marco started after him. With his free hand he reached for the last Pokéball at his belt.

"No," he said, voice cracking. "You're not getting away with this!"

Fearow launched into the air on broad wings, but Marco kept after it on foot. Angry tears streamed from his good eye, and he threw his final Pokéball.

"Hydro Cannon!"

An eight-foot tall Feraligatr roared to life within the Pokéball's flash and crashed to the ground on all fours, shaking it with its girth. Water materialized out of thin air and circled around it, faster and faster. Digging its massive claws into the sandy earth, it spat out a jet of water with everything it had. As though guided by an unseen force, the water arced like a lash and hit Giovanni square in the back. He

disappeared within it, completely overpowered, and crashed to the earth under the deluge. Fearow squawked in surprise, and Ariana nearly fell, too, but the attack had only grazed the big bird.

Overhead, a small flock of four Charizard noticed her escape and flew after her, Flamethrowers blazing. Marco didn't bother to watch and see her fate. He swayed on his feet, but sheer hatred and determination kept him upright. He limped forward, but paused when he noticed the Chimera tech Gary had yanked out of him wriggling in the sand. Feraligatr lumbered toward its prize, growling menacingly, and Marco scooped up the tech before following it. Ethan and Jolteon were close behind.

Giovanni was flat on his back on the ground, waterlogged and trembling. The sheer force of the Hydro Cannon had broken his spine in several places, along with a few ribs and all the bones in his arms and legs. He gasped for breath as his lungs struggled to support his caving chest cavity. Marco reached Feraligatr's side and looked down at the man who dared to call himself a father.

"S-Son," Giovanni sputtered.

The wriggling tech in Marco's hand drew his dilated gaze, and his breathing became more labored. Marco sank to his knees and let his hand fall from the side of his face. Giovanni hissed as he got an eyeful of Marco's mutilated face.

"You're not my father," he said, voice shaking with uncontrollable rage.

"I only wanted... It was all for you..." Speech was becoming more and more difficult for Giovanni as blood pooled in his throat.

"Rot in hell, you sick son of a bitch."

Marco lowered the bloody Chimera tech over Giovanni's face, and he let out a horrific scream. The wandering tentacles crawled over Giovanni's face and, sensing a new host, eagerly squirmed to find any opening they could. They slithered through his ears, through his wide eyes with a squelch and small splash of blood, burrowing through the eyeballs and churning them to a cheesy pulp. A few tentacles slithered into Giovanni's mouth and down his throat, cutting off his pitiful screams and his air supply. Marco held the tech down, hand shaking and tears falling, as Giovanni spasmed underneath him. Feraligatr hunched over beside him, snarling as the scent of death filled its sawed-off nostrils.

"Marco."

Ethan sank down beside him and put a hand on his shoulder. The contact had an enervating effect, and Marco slumped. All the rage and vengeance escaped him like air from a deflating balloon until he was nothing more than a husk of throbbing pain. His hand slipped from the tech as it continued to burrow deeper into Giovanni's skull, though he'd fallen still. Feraligatr, sensing its trainer's frailty, steadied Marco with a meaty arm and crouched down. Its massive jaw hung open, and its eyes shifted about the war zone in search of threats. It coiled its long tail around both Marco and Ethan.

"He's gone," Marco said.

Ethan sniffled and stared in morbid fascination at the machine chewing off Giovanni's face. "Yeah, good fucking riddance."

"Ivy..."

"C'mon, let's go find Lyra. She went to help Ivy."

"Did I... Is Ivy okay?"

"Let's go see for ourselves. Can you walk?"

He couldn't even stand up anymore, and from the looks of Ethan's etiolated, clammy pallor, neither of them was going to get far on foot today.

"Feraligatr, help me up."

The heavyset gator lowered itself to a reclining position, but before he got up, Marco paused and glanced back at Giovanni. A small pin carved in the shape of a feather inlaid with jade was stuck to his left breast next to the red Rocket 'R'. Hesitating only a moment, Marco retrieved and pocketed the small pin, then finally hauled himself onto Feraligatr's back. Ethan stood up and slung an awkward leg over the blue gator's back, and Marco helped him get situated behind him.

A crippling wave of pain flared in Marco's face, and he nearly fell off Feraligatr's back from the ensuing dizzy spell, but Ethan kept his good hand on his shoulder and steadied him.

"Buncha useless blood bags, the two of us," Ethan tried to lighten the mood.

"Lyra's still standing."

"Right, like anything could ever knock that chick down."

He searched for their third companion and found her with Blissey huddled together with Ivy's friends. Marco clutched his wounded eye and patted Feraligatr. "There she is. Let's go."

Feraligatr lumbered back to the group, slowly so as not to knock the boys from its back. Jolteon, Weavile, and Honchkrow hopped along at its side.

Giovanni lay dead where he'd fallen, forgotten, and the Chimera tech that had eaten through his face fell still, no longer viable without a living host.

Lily had all but forgotten her own pain as she stared down at Ivy through thick tears. She'd stopped convulsing and now lay still and unmoving. She wasn't breathing, but Gary continued to shake her and call out to her.

"Ivy, please," he wept.

Lily's heart broke with every melancholy plea. Ash kneeled beside her, trembling as tears ran down his cheeks and Mismagius looked on above him, frowning deeply as it felt Ash's sadness as though it were its own. Lily's Pikachu nudged Ivy's shoulder, but it got no reaction.

"Why isn't it working?" Ash said.

Lyra looked up, her eyes glazed with unshed tears. "Blissey's Softboiled can bring people back from the brink. It's stronger than any Potion, but..." She sniffled. "But if she's dead, then—"

"She's not dead," Gary interrupted, his voice strained with anguish. "Ivy, wake up, please wake up."

"Oh, Gary," Lily said.

"No," he spat, glaring between Ash and her. "She's not dead! She's not —"

Ash closed a hand around Gary's arm, startling him. "Gary."

The two childhood friends locked gazes, and Lily could barely watch as she saw the light of Gary's last hope leave his eyes. He began to

shake as a wave of fresh tears flooded down his dirty cheeks.

A low tremor shook the earth as Ivy's Tyranitar lumbered toward them and squatted down next to Lily. Its head was three times the size of hers and bore black phantom lacerations along its snout and jaw from an old battle with Sabrina's Hypno. Its yellow eye swiveled, tracking Ivy's face, and it lowered its head to hover just over her body next to Gary's shaking hands. When it growled, the sound came out sounding more like a whine, if dinosaurs could whine. Lily blinked, suddenly overcome with a fresh wave of despair.

Gary hovered over Ivy, his thumbs still rubbing her cheeks and smearing dirt and grime with his fallen tears. "Please," he whispered. "I can't do this without you. "

He leaned down and kissed her forehead. Espeon mewled in distress as it watched its trainer fall apart.

Tyranitar nudged Ivy's side gently and made a low grunting sound in the back of its throat. Lily wiped her eyes and took Ivy's limp hand in hers. She tried to steady her breathing, but the idea of a world without Ivy, who'd changed her life and brought her into a world where she could be more than she'd ever imagined, was unthinkable. She'd never had a real friend before her, always more interested in the dead than in the living. She squeezed Ivy's hand and sniffled.

And when something squeezed her back, she almost jumped out of her skin. Blinking the tears from her eyes, she squinted at their clasped hands. Ivy's fingers twitched and closed around hers, and Lily dared to hope.

"Ivy?" she said, voice shaky.

Lyra leaned over her middle, and Blissey patted its tummy where the mystical egg it had toted around once nestled. Tyranitar growled and nudged Ivy again, jostling Gary.

"Her wound," Lyra said.

Ash and Lily peered at the knife wound that had stopped bleeding a little while ago. It leaked a thick, silver liquid that pooled in the broken armor and emitted a rancid, black miasma, curling and smokey.

"Ivy," Lily said again, squeezing her hand back.

"No way, is she..." Ash trailed off, afraid to say it aloud and shatter the fragile hope that had settled over the group.

Gary kept his eyes on her face. "Ivy?"

"Oh my god." Lyra traced a finger around the knife wound, and it came away slick with silver liquid. "It's gone."

Gary looked back to confirm it himself, but a hand on his thigh drew his attention back. Lily could hardly breathe as she watched Ivy's eyes crack open.

"Ivy!" she exclaimed.

Gary lost what little composure he'd had left and scooped her up under her shoulders. He fisted a hand in her long hair and stared into her half-lidded eyes. She brought the hand Lily wasn't holding up to his face and gently touched his temple.

"Can't get ridda me that easy," she whispered.

Overcome with grief and joy, Gary pulled her into a crushing embrace and sobbed into crook of her neck. "Oh my god," he said. "Oh my god."

"Ivy," Ash said, wiping his tears.

Lyra was smiling through her own tears, and she covered her mouth in awe.

"I thought I lost you," Gary said, still clutching Ivy like she might float away at any moment. "God, I thought..."

"You think too much."

Ivy rested her cheek against him, and he pulled away to look at her. Careless of their audience, he gripped her hair tighter and kissed her fiercely. It only lasted a moment, but Lily laughed through her tears despite herself, overcome with relief.

"Pesky woman," Gary whispered against her lips.

Ivy laughed and hugged him again, shaking as her tears spilled over his shoulder. Tyranitar made a huffing sound and hovered just behind Gary's shoulder. Gary pulled away so she could reach for the big dinosaur. Tyranitar nudged her chest with its snout, and she wrapped her arms around its head, barely able to make a full circle around it.

"Still here, boy," she said.

Tyranitar growled but allowed the contact and let its eyes droop in contentment.

"Ivy," Lily said.

Ivy patted Tyranitar and turned to embrace Lily and Ash, who together lifted her up off the ground.

"I thought we lost you there for a minute," Ash said.

"It's a miracle," Lily agreed.

Gary let them have their moment and approached Lyra. She swallowed and stood up next to Blissey.

"Lyra, right?" he said.

She nodded, and he held out his hand.

"Thank you. I dunno how you did it, but thank you."

She accepted his hand and shook it. "You're welcome, but I didn't do anything. Not in time, anyway."

"What?"

Lyra patted Blissey on its tufted head. "Blissey's Softboiled can heal any injury, even mortal ones, but it can't revive the dead." She looked over his shoulder at Ivy, who was still tearfully reuniting with Ash and Lily. "Whatever brought her back from that, it wasn't me and Blissey."

Lily caught the way Gary was looking back at them like Ivy had died all over again, but before she could say anything, a fearsome Feraligatr walked right up to Lyra and Gary and shoved its face against Lyra's chest. Blissey yipped angrily and tried to back away, but the oversized reptile ignored it.

Lyra laid a hand on Feraligatr's toothy maw, and she lit up like Christmas morning. "Marco, Ethan!"

She ran to Feraligatr's side and helped Marco dismount, but Ethan groaned and slumped.

"Please don't make me get off. I feel like my fucking arm's gonna fall off."

Lyra slung Marco's arm over her shoulder and sniffled. "Marco..."

"I'm okay," he said softly. "Relatively speaking."

"I have to get you to a hospital."

"Ivy, is she...?"

"She's okay," Gary said, holding out a hand for Marco.

They sized each other up a moment, and for a second Lily was afraid Gary would lash out. But he didn't, and Marco hesitantly took his hand as a crutch.

"You pulled that tech off me," Marco said. "I owe you one."

"As far as I'm concerned, we're square." Gary nodded at Lyra.

"You saved her?" Marco asked Lyra.

"She's alive," Lyra said, smiling a little.

The sight of Marco gave Lily pause. His face looked like that Feraligatr had taken a bite out of it. Haggard and unable to stand on his own, she could hardly believe this was the same Marco that had commanded the red Gyarados and nearly killed her. Ivy burst out laughing and crying and reached for him, and with Lyra's help Marco met her halfway.

"Oh my god, Ivy," Marco said, squeezing his good eye shut to hide his tears. "I'm so sorry, I knew what was happening but I couldn't... I had no control—"

"It's okay, I'm okay. I know you didn't have a choice." She pulled back and laid a hand over the flayed flesh on the left side of his face. "We have to get you to a hospital. We can talk later."

"Some common sense," Lyra said. "Now I know how he stayed alive all those years before meeting me."

Ivy and Lyra exchanged a look, and despite the horrors they'd both lived through in this war, they smiled at each other.

"I'm pretty sure there's an insult against me in there somewhere," Ethan said. "Someone remind me later to think of a comeback."

Gary went around Feraligatr to help Ethan down. "C'mon, I've got a

faster way to get everyone back to the city."

"Oh, yeah? Whatcha gonna do, lecture me until I haul my own ass to the hospital?"

Ash laughed, and Gary shot him a dirty look. He approached, and Lily followed him. Holding out a hand to Ethan he said, "Ash Ketchum. I have a feeling you and me'll get along great."

Ethan blinked down at the offered hand. "I'd shake your hand, but this arm hurts like a bitch, man."

Ash's Pikachu squeaked happily and joined Lily's Pikachu on the ground, where the two of them nuzzled Ethan's legs. Ethan's gaze alighted on Lily and he managed a lazy smile for her.

"Hey, and you are?"

"The girl who fried my Gyarados," Marco said.

Lily blushed, and for a moment the ache in her left arm was the last thing on her mind. "Um, I..."

"No shit?" Ethan said. "Then I guess we'll all get along. That red Gyarados tried to kill me the first time we saw her. Still haven't gotten over that. You got a name, Lady Vengeance?"

"Lily," Lily said, still uncomfortably warm.

Ash put arm around her waist, which did nothing for her blush. Mismagius floated closer to Ethan's eye-level and grinned. He recoiled from the Ghost's stench.

"Gary, hospital?" Ash said.

All around them, the war was slowly pittering out as survivors and their Pokémon surrendered. The Cinnabarean soldiers took hostages and corralled them into lines to march back to the city. Lily saw Carvalho no longer mounted on his majestic Rapidash shouting orders. The back of his armor was sprayed red with blood, but he seemed well enough to be barking at his subordinates.

"Hey!" Rosa jogged to the group looking worse for wear. A sleek Leafeon trotted next to her, bladed tail swishing as its dark eyes scanned the group for threats.

"Rosa," Gary said. "Glad to see you're okay."

"Likewise, but I can't say for how long. Look."

She pointed south toward Mt. Cinnabar, which was belching thick, grey clouds of ash and smoke. The winds carried the ash south toward town. Lily looked around, but there was no sign of Blaine.

"Where did Blaine go?" she asked.

"I saw him take off with some woman on a Charizard. They were headed back to town," Rosa said.

Typhlosion wandered back to the group and sized up Feraligatr, but the blue gator paid it little mind and it nudged Ethan gently in the back. Ethan tried to turn around and greet it, but swore when his injuries pained him.

"That volcano looks like it's gonna blow big time," Ivy said. "Blaine must be trying to stop it. We have to help."

"The only thing you're gonna help is a nurse with your medical history," Gary said. "Same goes for you guys." He indicated Ethan and Marco.

"Lily, you should get to a hospital, too," Ash said.

"So should you," she shot back. "We all need help, but we're all gonna be dead if that volcano explodes. I'm helping Blaine. I can deal with a little pain."

She felt Marco's one-eyed gaze on her profile, but he said nothing.

"We don't have time to argue," Lyra said. "We can deal with everything else once this is over. Right now, whoever's able has to get to that volcano and figure out what the hell's going on before we're all dust. Gary, you said you could get us there fast?"

Gary reached for a Pokéball at his belt. "Yeah, but you won't like it."

"Marco needs medical attention. I don't have to like it, it just has to work."

Gary tossed out the Pokéball and Alakazam materialized. Espeon went to its side and sat down, purring.

"Alakazam can Teleport us all. Take my hand."

Everyone recalled their Pokémon and clasped hands in a line that

ended with Alakazam. Lily stood between Ash and Ivy, and her Pikachu perched on her good shoulder.

"Hold on."

Before she could mentally prepare herself, the ground fell out from underneath her and left her stomach behind. Lily opened her mouth in a scream, but before she could even inhale the breath, she was back on solid ground and stumbling to catch her balance. Pikachu groaned on her shoulder and leaned against her head, woozy.

"Fuck you, Gary," Ethan said as he recovered from retching.

Rosa patted him on the shoulder, and he swore in pain. "You get used to it."

Alakazam had Teleported them back to the center of town, but it was almost deserted as civilians headed en masse for the coast to safety. Farther south at the harbor, more mounted Charizard circled in the sky and soldiers directed evacuating townspeople. Lily shivered in dread. Mt. Cinnabar rumbled again and spewed more ash. When she looked up, she could swear she saw the orange flash of magma spurting among the ashes.

"This is bad," Lily said.

A hand on her injured shoulder startled her and she winced in pain, but Rosa sprayed something over the knife wound Marco had inflicted on her shoulder. The Super Potion stung like mad, but she could feel her flesh gobbling up the salve.

"You're welcome," Rosa said softly once the bottle was empty.

Lily wanted to say something to her about her Beartic, about how grateful she was to Rosa for saving her first from Victreebel then from the Dugtrio, but Lyra was asking where the hospital was for Marco, and Gary was looking at Lily expectantly.

"Huh? Oh, the hospital?" Lily felt small under their gazes and took a step back. "Um, right, it's just two blocks down that way." She pointed down the street to the east.

"Good. I'll take them, then meet up with you guys after," Lyra said.

"I'm staying," Ivy said.

"No, you're not," Gary protested.

"Gary Oak, you do *not* order me what to do."

"You almost fucking died out there!" he hissed. "I think that gives me the right to a say in this."

"Yeah, well, I'm still here and I'm fine. Whatever you guys gave me really worked. I feel like a million bucks."

Ash put a hand each on their shoulders. "Okay, guys, break it up."

The volcano rumbled again and drew Lily's attention. This time she was sure she saw magma jumping from the mouth like fireworks, and Rosa saw it, too.

"Oh no," Rosa said. "Hey, you two, you can both stay behind and argue if that's what you want to do. That volcano's not going to wait."

Lily kept her eyes on the volcano, not believing what she was seeing. In all her life, the volcano had never even so much as smoked. Blaine and his Fire-types were lauded as being able to control the mountain somehow, and given his track record, everyone believed it. But would he be able to stop an active volcano from burying the island now?

Lost in her fears, she searched the sky, wishing things hadn't come to this. A red Gyarados on a rampage was one thing, but a volcano? There was no way to fight that. The ashes rained down like grey snow and fast accumulated in her damp hair. The sulfur in the air burned her eyes, which were red and bloodshot from crying earlier. Ivy, Gary, and Ash continued to bicker, but she paid them no mind. She sniffled and wiped her eyes, and when she looked up again, a shadow passed through the smoke.

"What the...?"

She rubbed her eyes again and followed the shadow. Ashes swirled in flurries to get away from it, beaten asunder by great wings. A thick body and long tail followed the wings, all in shadow as it soared around the volcano. A Charizard?

No, bigger. Way bigger.

Something in her heart recognized the creature before her mind did, and it clenched in trepidation. Magma burst from the volcano's mouth again and cut through the ashy shadows, illuminating streaks of the

huge beast as it flew by in the distance. Orange scales, talons as long as swords. The Dragonite had to be forty feet long from nose to tail with a wingspan just as wide. For the flash of a second, she was sure she saw someone riding it, black against its bright orange scales. The Dragon faded back into the predawn gloom to the south a moment later before she could trust her eyes enough to believe what she'd seen.

That Dragonite...

"...and Lyra will meet us there," Gary was saying. "Okay?"

"Works for me," Ash said.

"Then let's get the hell up there," Ivy said, reaching for a Pokéball. But when she tossed it, nothing came out. She stared for a couple seconds at the empty ball in her hand, confused, until a shadow passed over her features and she returned it to her belt. "...Oh, wrong one," she muttered, tossing out Houndoom's Pokéball.

Gary's eyes fell. "Ivy..."

"I'm fine. Are we going?"

Lily didn't believe those words, and no one else did either, it seemed. But there were more pressing concerns at hand.

"The volcano's spewing lava," Lily said. "We have to find Blaine now."

Rosa was crouched on her knees with a hand on Leafeon and another on the ground. "I've already found him. He's in the volcano..."

"What is it?"

"Something's blocking me. I know he's in there, but I can't pinpoint him."

"Then we'll have to explore on foot," Gary said, recalling Alakazam in favor of Arcanine. To Lyra he said, "Come find us when you can."

She nodded and supported both Marco and Ethan on her shoulders. "Don't let that volcano blow till I get there."

Marco grabbed Ivy's hand. "Be careful."

"Worry about yourself."

"There won't be anything to worry about if that volcano blows." Rosa was already on her feet and jogging with Leafeon to the man made entrance. "C'mon!"

"Let's go, ChuChu, Pika." Lily took off after her, and Ash, Gary, and Ivy soon followed while Lyra took Ethan and Marco to the hospital. The two Pikachu were hot on Lily's heels and sparking.

She thought briefly about the Dragonite she thought she'd seen, but pushed the thought to the back of her mind. There would be time for that later if they could survive the volcano. The volcano's interior was maze-like, and Lily couldn't remember which way they'd gone when they were last in here looking for the Gym. But Rosa led the way with Leafeon.

"I felt him down below," she called back over her shoulder. "We'll have to search the lower floors."

"Isn't that where the lava is?" Lily said.

"It'll be everywhere soon if we don't figure out a way to stop it."

Ash, Gary, and Ivy caught up to Lily and Rosa soon, and they were all running together down a long, whitewashed corridor down a flight of stairs. All of a sudden, the volcano rumbled like a bomb had gone off, and Lily lost her balance. She screamed and took a tumble down the stairs along with the others. One of the Pikachu sparked in fear, and lightning tore into the walls. The lamps overhead came loose from the ceiling and fell as the walls began to crumble and the temperature skyrocketed.

"Lily!" Ash called, but his voice was drowned out by the rumble.

Lily rolled to the bottom of the staircase, her sore left shoulder on fire again despite the Super Potion's healing effects. Pikachu squeaked next to her and struggled to stand.

"ChuChu," she said, reaching for the yellow rodent. But when it looked up at her, she hesitated. "Oh, sorry Pika. But if you're here, then where's ChuChu?"

Gary sat up next to her with a groan and shook his head. Dust rained down from his disheveled hair and he coughed. Arcanine whined and nudged him in his side.

"Ugh, what just happened?"

Lily picked up Ash's Pikachu and let it climb up onto her good shoulder. "Looks like the Gym's losing its structural integrity." She wiped her brow. "And I think the AC's busted."

Gary let Arcanine help him to his feet, and Lily didn't miss the way he struggled, his breathing labored. "Not that I don't appreciate the humor, but did you see what happened to the others?"

Rocks, a broken ceiling lamp, and shattered tile piled up in the staircase and blocked the way back up.

"I'm guessing they got stuck on the other side."

Pikachu squeaked as Lily approached the fallen rocks, and she heard voices on the other side. She was about to press her ear to the rocks, but a purple face materialized through the rocks and startled her. Mismagius grinned down at Lily and Gary and billowed as if dancing.

"Could you please tell Ash we're okay?" Lily said.

"What the hell? Isn't that Agatha's Misamgius? Is she here?" Gary said.

"I'll explain later. Right now, since you and me're stuck down here, looks like we're the downsized search party."

Mismagius evaporated into smoke and receded back through the rocks, presumably to relay Lily's message. Pikachu squeaked after it and reached out with its little paw toward the rocks.

"It's okay, Pika. We'll find Ash later, okay?" Lily reassured the yellow rodent. "Gary, are you okay to keep going? Do you need help?"

Gary winced and laid a hand on Arcanine's flank. The orange canine whined and nudged him with its wet muzzle. "I'll manage. Let's find Blaine before this volcano blows with us inside it."

"Okay."

They continued down the hall until they came to another set of stairs. The heat grew more sweltering as they descended, and Lily choked on her breath. Pikachu squeaked on her shoulder, distressed, and she petted it.

"It's okay, Pika. We'll be okay."

The volcano rumbled again, and Gary swore. Lily looked back at him.

"It's starting to erupt," Gary said by way of explanation. He blinked, and for a split second, Lily was sure his eyes had gone deathly white. But it was gone in an instant, and he looked up at her. "I dunno how much longer it'll hold."

"Then we gotta hurry."

She picked up the pace and tried to ignore the pain in her shoulder and the suffocating heat. At the bottom of the staircase, they came upon a door that was slightly ajar. Voices drifted to them from the other side, and Lily pushed past it without waiting for admittance. Nimbus and Blaine where in the room, which was just as hot as the hallway but not because of the volcano's eruption. A seven-foot tall fire blazed in a contained pit in the center of the room, and a hunchbacked, old woman in flowing white silks sat cross legged next to it. Her grey hair was so long it coiled in a gleaming, silver bundle behind her as she rocked back and forth. She wore a thick, black blindfold over her eyes and muttered under breath, ignoring Blaine and Nimbus.

"Miss Kida, Mr. Oak," Blaine said. "You have a death wish?"

"We came to help," Lily said.

Nimbus laughed nervously. "Help? What can you do? This mountain's gonna blow any minute!"

Blaine took a steadying breath. "That's enough, Nimbus. You should have evacuated a long time ago."

"Oh, right, brilliant, and leave you here? The Pyromancer won't even listen to me! I've tried to get her out since I contacted Marla, but she just—"

"*Enough*, Nimbus," Blaine interrupted him. He went to the large supercomputer on the other side of the room and typed in a few commands. The screen flickered and showed a moving bird's eye view of Mt. Cinnabar.

"Is that live?" Gary said, walking farther inside with Arcanine.

"Marla's recording this as we speak," Blaine confirmed.

The volcano was in worse shape than it had been when Lily and Gary were outside. Lava spurted from the mouth like blood from a slashed artery and ran down the sides to the city below. The smoke had

turned black and angry as it roiled high in the lightening sky.

"Blaine, we have to evacuate," Nimbus said.

Blaine watched the screen in silence, flinty eyes hard and deep in thought. "...No. I'm going below."

Nimbus sputtered. "What?! That's suicide! You'll be roasted alive, or maybe worse!"

"Is there something worse than getting roasted alive?" Lily wondered aloud.

"Hey!" Gary crossed the room with some effort but did his best to stand up straight in front of Blaine. "Can you fix this or not? 'Cause as far as I know, even Ignifer can't stop an active volcano."

Blaine pressed his lips together. "I suppose you'll find out." He turned to Nimbus and tossed out a Pokéball. His robust Ninetales appeared and tossed its head at Arcanine, who growled in challenge. "They don't leave this room, am I clear?"

"Y-Yes, sir," Nimbus said.

"The hell we're not leaving," Gary bit out. "What're you gonna do?"

Blaine punched a few more keys on the supercomputer, and the blazing fire in the center of the room parted to reveal a hidden platform. He crossed the room, oblivious to the fire that licked at his armor and stepped onto the platform where Gary and Lily could not hope to follow if they didn't want to get burned.

"I'm going to save my island," Blaine said.

The platform descended, and soon he was out of sight and the flames crept back over the platform to hide it.

"Damnit." Gary went to the supercomputer and studied the screen, which still had a view of the steadily erupting Mt. Cinnabar.

Lily joined him, and Pikachu hopped off her shoulder onto the keyboard. "Gary, can Ignifer really not do anything about a volcano? Not even someone like Blaine?"

Gary clenched his teeth. He was sweating profusely now with the damnable heat in this room. "No, it's impossible." He spared her a glance askance. "But I've seen a lotta impossible today."

Lily backed away from the computer screen, hating how helpless she felt. The old crone's muttering drew her attention, and she wandered closer. Before she could say anything to the woman, however, the earth shook again.

"Oh dear!" Nimbus huddled behind the massive keyboard.

Ninetales and Arcanine looked around, ears flat and hackles raised, nervous.

"Gary?" Lily said, a little more frantic than she'd intended.

Gary tossed out another Pokéball, and Espeon appeared. It swayed in the heat and hissed, but Gary kneeled down and laid a hand on its back. To Lily's horror, both his and Espeon's eyes faded to ghastly white and they both fell silent.

"What the..."

The old crone lashed out and closed her bony fingers around Lily's bum left arm hard enough to hurt all of a sudden. Lily recoiled in surprise, but the crone's grip was iron-clad for such a frail woman.

"Daughter of Dragons, the one you seek is nigh."

"Let me go!" Lily cried out.

"He waits," the crone implored her. "Will you go?"

"Go where? Let go! You're hurting me!"

Another rumble racked the volcano, and the flames in the middle of the room flailed. The crone let Lily go and grabbed at her hair to wrap herself in it, trembling. Pikachu ran to Lily's side and huddled in her lap.

"The volcano!"

Nimbus's voice drew Lily's attention back to the monitor, which showed the volcano erupting in full force now. Magma spewed from the mouth in powerful sneezes and ran down the sides of the mountain onto the streets below. Houses caught fire as the river of lava spread around the base of Mt. Cinnabar, slow-moving but lethal. One of the buildings exploded in an orange and black mushroom cloud when the magma found its gas-powered generators. Gary remained hunched over Espeon, eyes devoid of color, and Lily

resolved to snap him out of whatever trance he was in and get the hell out of here. She crawled toward him as the room shook and the temperature soared. Arcanine barked and barked, while Ninetales's nine tails billowed and sparked with unshed cinders.

"What are you?" Gary said in a voice that wasn't his to no one at all.

"Gary," Lily said. "Snap out of it, Gary!"

He screamed all of a sudden and clutched his head. Fingers dug into his scalp hard enough to pierce the skin and pull out hair.

Lily stared at him in fear, unsure what was happening, and another earthquake rumbled the volcano. She and Gary toppled over each other, and the color returned to his eyes as he came to a sliding stop just shy of the dancing flames. Himself again, Gary recoiled on instinct from the fire. It licked his armored arms like it was reaching for him, and he scrambled backwards.

"He waits!" the crone cried out. "He waits!"

"Blaine, can you hear me? Blaine!" Nimbus shouted into some kind of speaker on the supercomputer's keyboard.

A loud cracking sound cut through the din, and Lily winced and covered her ears. She caught a glimpse of the screen, but what she saw could not have been real. The image continued to move as Marla flew with her Charizard, but the volcano itself stood still as death, the smoke and the ashes and the magma. It froze in the streets and over the melting, burning dwellings it had already touched, stuck in time.

What?

Lily blinked, and the magma began to recede toward the main street. It flowed backwards out of alleys and front doors, taking with it its deadly heat. Gary got to his feet, panting, and watched the screen with Lily as he clutched his aching head.

"The hell?"

"Are you seeing this?" she said.

The sidewalks lining that main street became the lava's buffers, caging it in as it flowed in an unnaturally controlled manner down the main street in a straight shot for the eastern harbor, where it dumped harmlessly into the water. A mile of eastern coastline went up in

opaque, white steam as the water supercooled the magma and screamed and hissed. Mt. Cinnabar continued to blow, but all the lava it spat up ended up on the main street as though fenced in by an invisible forcefield.

"I'm seeing it," Gary said. "But I can't believe it."

Nimbus blinked up at the screen and laughed nervously. "He... He's done it!"

The volcano continued to erupt, but its output diminished noticeably as five minutes became fifteen, then twenty, until soon the magma began to harden on the volcano's face instead of dribbling all the way down to the street. In the shaky video feed, trainers mounted on Charizard had landed on intact rooftops and released a small army of Water Pokémon, from Poliwhirl to Kingler, and began spraying the lava in the main street, helping it cool and harden. Lily got to her feet, Pikachu on her shoulder, and stared unblinking at the screen, uncomprehending.

Nimbus laughed again and did a little dance. "He's done it!" He punched a few commands into the supercomputer, and the flames near the crazed crone parted once more to reveal the hidden platform. Blaine rose on the platform, swayed on his feet, and fell over.

"Blaine!"

Lily rushed to his side and dragged him away from the flames as best she could. She flipped him onto his back and was horrified to see his armor was smoking. Steeling herself, she worked off the armored glove on his right hand but stopped when she saw his raw skin underneath. It was rotted black and bubbling, like his blood was boiling. The skin over his nail beds was peeling back slowly of its own accord and folding over itself, revealing bloody muscle and bone beneath.

"Oh my god..."

Blaine coughed and attempted to sit up. Nimbus rushed to his side and offered a shoulder to lean on. Disoriented, it took Blaine a moment to recognize Lily and Nimbus huddled around him. But when his eyes focused on Lily, he immediately withdrew his hand and tucked it under his other arm out of sight.

"Blaine, you're hurt," she said. "We have to get you to the hospital—"

"Nimbus, the eruption," Blaine interrupted.

"Over, sir," Nimbus said, hair drenched in sweat but smiling nonetheless. "You've done it, come and see."

Nimbus helped Blaine stand and hobble to the supercomputer, where the image of Mt. Cinnabar had cleared up considerably. Gary shook his head.

"This isn't possible," he said more to himself than the other people in the room. "We should all be dead."

"But we're not," Blaine said. "And my island is safe."

Gary glared at Blaine, and Lily shivered at the look in his haggard eyes despite the sweltering heat in the room. "Is it?"

"Yes," Blaine said a little more forcefully. "And the battle is over, for now. Nimbus, patch me through to Marla and Carvalho. The evacuation is canceled."

Nimbus smiled and wiped the dripping sweat from his upper lip. "E-Excellent news, sir! I'll get on that right away!"

Ninetales nudged Blaine in the shoulder, but when it got a whiff of his uncovered, blistering hand, it curled back its lips and growled. Blaine hid the hand behind his back and patted the big fox on the muzzle with his other hand to soothe it. Lily watched the exchange with a heavy gaze, and Blaine caught her staring.

"That'll be all Miss Kida, Mr. Oak. For now, get yourselves cleaned up and be grateful you survived."

"We did more than that," Gary said. "Team Rocket's finished. We won the war."

Despite his debilitated state, Blaine flinty gaze settled on Gary and seemed to cow him with a single look. Espeon mewled in worry as it looked up at its trainer, and Gary took a small step back.

"No one wins in a war. This was only one battle in an ugly and ancient war that's been going on for longer than you can imagine. Now, get out of my way. I'm going to restore order to my island."

Blaine pushed past them to get to the stairs.

"Wait, Blaine," Lily said. "Um, you can't go that way. There was a

cave-in during the eruption." She put her hands up. "Not that we caused it or something, it kinda just happened..."

"I appreciate the concern, Miss Kida, but a few rocks never stopped me before."

He exited the room with Ninetales in tow. Pikachu shifted nervously on Lily's shoulder, and she reached up to pet it aimlessly.

"Dr. Nimbus," Gary said, still clutching his head. "You should get out of this heat, too."

"It is *quite* hot in here," Nimbus agreed. "It appears the central air conditioning system blew out during the eruption. Oh dear, that'll take some time to repair."

"You too," Lily said to the old crone still huddled on the floor and hiding her face with her hair.

"Oh, just leave her there," Nimbus said. "She hasn't left this room in years, so she won't start now."

"What? You can't be serious," Gary said.

Nimbus only half listened to them as he fiddled with the supercomputer. "The Pyromancer never leaves the sacred fire."

Gary and Lily exchanged a look.

Pyromancer?

A fresh wave of heat swept through the room, and something roared beyond the exit.

"Ah, that'll be Blaine with the way out," Nimbus said, finishing up a few commands on the keyboard. "Shall we?"

Lily's shoulder was giving her a hard time after all the excitement, and exhaustion was fast setting in. She cast a last glance at the strange woman huddled on the floor and headed for the door. Gary was the last one out, and he lingered a moment, eyes drawn to the blazing fire growing out of the hidden platform.

"Gary?"

As though he'd forgotten she was there, he whirled in shock and blinked a few times. Shaky hands covered his ears, and he averted his

gaze.

"Gary, are you okay? Before, you were screaming. What happened?"

He looked back at the fire. "I dunno. But I'm gonna find out."

Lily reached for his hand and tugged gently. He was cold to the touch despite the overwhelming heat in the small room. Gary let her lead him out, Arcanine and Espeon on either side of them, and Lily guided him through the door. She looked back to close it after Arcanine had ducked out and saw the Pyromancer standing, the flames obscuring half her form, staring through her blindfold. A baleful tremor ran down Lily's spine, and she hastily pulled the door closed behind her just to get away from that accusatory stare. The woman was blindfolded, and still Lily's skin crawled under her armor.

"Through here, kids," Nimbus said.

Blaine and Ninetales were just ahead where the cave-in had separated Lily and Gary from the rest of their group, but the rocks and debris that had clogged the stairwell were nearly completely melted thanks to Ninetales's Fire Blast. There was no sign of anyone on the other side, and once it was safe to move, Blaine led them over the fast-cooling molten rock up the stairs.

Outside, the sun was finally up and ash coated the streets in a thin, grey layer. The main street was charred black and smoking, where several inches of lava continued to cool and harden under a watery assault from all sides. The air still stank of sulfur, but the breeze from the east was a godsend after the heat of the volcano's interior and Lily almost passed out from sheer exhaustion right there on the ground.

"Pika!"

Ash jogged to Lily and Gary alongside Ivy, Rosa, and Lyra. Pikachu chittered happily and leaped from Lily's shoulder to run to Ash.

"ChuChu, hey!"

Lily's Pikachu ran alongside Ash and bounded toward her, happy to be reunited after the volcanic scare.

"What happened?" Lyra said. "One minute we were out here watching the volcano blow, and the next..." She indicated the sunken main street where Cinnabarean soldiers commanded hordes of Water-type Pokémon to keep up their dousing.

"Whoa, Gary!"

Ivy caught him before he fell over. Blood ran down his forehead and the back of his neck where he'd hurt himself during his Psychic spell earlier. His weight pushed her down, and Lyra had to lend her shoulder to help carry him. He was all but dead on his feet.

"Nimbus," Blaine said. "Get these kids to the hospital and make sure they don't leave until they can walk out on their own. I have business to attend to."

"Oh, sure Blaine, no problem."

Lily watched him go, and before she knew what was happening, Rosa had lent her an arm to lean on.

"C'mon, kid," she said. "Might as well finish what I started to see you safely to the hospital."

"Rosa..."

"I think we could all use some rest," Ash said. "I feel like I got hit by a truck...twice, hah."

The marks on his face had gotten worse and were turning black in places.

"Ash, what happened out there? Where's Gengar?" Lily said.

He rubbed his eyes. "Long story... How 'bout a nap first?"

Ivy and Lyra were already dragging Gary to the hospital, so Rosa, Ash, and Lily followed.

For the next few days, Ivy was in and out of the Cinnabar Hospital and the Pokémon Center checking up on everyone's Pokémon and getting checked out herself. She watched behind the wide window that looked in on the Pokémon Center's OR as a team of skilled nurses and surgeons operated on Lily's Dodrio. They'd been reluctant even to try after seeing the state the bird was in when Ivy brought it in, but she'd insisted in her ever charming manner with promises of violence if they didn't try. That conversation was over fast, and she'd been watching them work now for close to two hours.

"You convinced them, I see."

Lyra joined her at the window and peered in. They were both in comfortable plain clothes now that the fighting was over, Ivy in a blue sundress and Lyra in shorts and a tank top, but Lyra also had an ice pack that she held against her bruised face over her left eye, which had swollen shut thanks to the many hairline fractures Giovanni had given her in their skirmish. Otherwise, she was on her feet and as well as could be. After Lily, Ash, and Rosa all checked into the hospital, Ivy and Lyra were the only ones without immediate need for emergency medical treatment and had taken it upon themselves to get everyone's Pokémon taken care of.

"I have a way with knives."

"Don't you mean words?"

Ivy spared her a glance. "Those, too."

They stood together in comfortable silence as they watched the medics work. One of Dodrio's three heads, badly burned and unmoving under the effects of anesthesia, came into view when a nurse moved. Ivy ran her fingers over the glass.

"You know," she said, "I never woulda thought I'd be so worried over a bird. I used to hate the things."

"Marco will be thrilled to hear it."

Ivy smiled and faced Lyra. "I don't think I got a chance to thank you for what you did."

"About that, I don't even know if I did much of anything to help you in the end. Whatever happened to make you wake up, it didn't have anything to do with Blissey or me."

"No, not that. I mean, that too, but that's not what I meant." Ivy took her hand in hers and waited until she had Lyra's full attention. "I mean Marco. We started this fight alone, and I spent so much time wondering if he was okay, if he'd ended up in a ditch somewhere, I don't even know. But he made it through the worst of the worst, and that's because of you and Ethan."

Lyra flushed prettily. "Well, technically it was Gary who pulled that tech off of him."

"Yeah, but that's beside the point. I know because I went through the same thing. Believe me, Marco wouldna made it this far without you

guys there to help him every step of the way." She turned back to the glass and Dodrio beyond it. "And neither would I."

They stayed that way for a little longer before Lyra suggested they get something to eat.

"Yeah, I'd like that," Ivy said. "Then maybe we can go check on the others."

"Sounds good. I just have to go pick up Marco's Gyarados at the front desk."

They headed back to the lobby, where Nurse Joy handed Lyra an Ultra Ball marked with a red 'G'.

"Wow, I can't believe they agreed to take care of that thing," Ivy said.

"I guess I've got a way with words, too." Lyra winked at her, and Ivy grinned.

"I can see why Marco likes you."

Lyra almost dropped Gyarados's Ultra Ball. "What? Oh, I dunno about that, I mean... What do you mean, exactly?"

Ivy bit back a laugh. "I didn't mean anything." She tapped Lyra's shoulder. "C'mon, turns out I'm starving."

They headed outside, where a full crew of Cinnabarean soldiers and their Pokémon were still at work cleaning up the destroyed homes and buildings along the main street. The damage had been minimal given the level of catastrophe, nothing short of a miracle, though Ivy suspected it was nothing of the sort. Blaine, however, had been too busy restoring order and heading up the capture and imprisonment of Rocket and JRM survivors to visit the hospital.

The girls decided to grab lunch at a food stall that had been set up by some local fishermen's wives to feed the recovering soldiers as a thanks for their service and for cleaning up the town. After a short wait in line, Ivy and Lyra headed to the docks and sat down on one of the empty piers with a view of the midday seascape, endless blue for as far as the eye could see. Sailboats and trawlers and yachts of all shapes and sizes bobbed in the water where they were moored to the docks, but they were empty. Able-bodied Cinnabareans were busy cleaning up the northern farms and plantations or rebuilding after the eruption. A mile of the east bay was destroyed under tons and tons of

black, hardened lava that had decimated the coral reefs. Hardly anyone was without something to do, so the girls were not bothered as they sat side by side, bare feet in the water and munching on roasted Remoraid fillets.

"By the way, how *did* you end up getting dragged into all this?" Ivy said.

Lyra smiled to herself. "You know, it's kind of a funny story, actually."

"I could use a laugh about now."

Lyra finished off her food and leaned back on her hands. "Well, when I first ran into Marco, he was running for his life...from Ethan. And I mean, he *literally* ran into me."

Lyra told her about their first adventure together in Goldenrod City. Ethan had been hunting Marco from Cherrygrove City on suspicions of being a member of Team Rocket that had stolen a Pokémon from Elm's care in Newbark Town. The miscommunication lasted until Marco ran into Lyra and broke his nose when he fell on the ground, unable to knock her down. In the commotion, the three of them ended up in the middle of a Team Rocket-infested Goldenrod that ended with the Radio Tower getting blown to smithereens and Gym Leader Whitney smuggling them out of town with an order never to return unless they had a death wish.

"You meet a guy and the first thing you do is break his nose," Ivy said. "Must've been a hell of a first impression."

"It wasn't on purpose," Lyra mused, though she didn't deny it. "I was working for Whitney in her Gym until Marco and Ethan found me. Whitney was pandering to Team Rocket, like most of the Johto Gym Leaders. Team Rocket was just too widespread and powerful, and not everyone was stupid enough to fight them. It was certain death."

"I had a feeling it'd be like that. So, was it a bust? Recruiting the Gym Leaders, I mean."

"Yes and no. Some of them weren't happy about Team Rocket's policies and wanted a change, but it just didn't seem feasible. Some didn't even care. Pretty sure I'll never be welcomed back in Olivine as long as Jasmine's still breathing. We didn't exactly see eye-to-eye, if you know what I mean."

Ivy smiled to herself. "I think I can imagine."

"But it wasn't all bleak. Chuck of Cianwood really saved us when Jasmine went on the warpath. He and Ethan go way back. Guess that's how Ethan knows Gary, from what I gathered."

"Small world."

Lyra let her head tilt back and scanned the clear, blue sky. It was so different from when the two of them had been embroiled in battle just days ago. There wasn't even a trace of the volcano having erupted. Cinnabar was just an island paradise in the middle of a vast ocean again.

"Maybe. But sometimes I think these crazy things happen for a reason." Lyra cast Ivy a glance askance. "Reasons we can't really explain, but somehow they work out."

"What, like fate? Yeah, right."

"You don't believe in fate?"

Ivy set down her empty tray and licked the grease from her fingers. "I believe in myself, and in the people that can stand to be around me. That's more faith than I ever had growing up."

Lyra studied her. "You really remind me of him, you know. I almost feel like I'm talking to Marco instead of you."

"There you are!"

Rosa was heading toward them along the pier. Something round and spiky was rolling along beside her and making a racket on the docks. As it got closer, Ivy noticed that it was tearing up the wooden planks and leaving splinters in its wake. Rosa had changed into a long, yellow skirt and white blouse with her hair long and loose, and Ivy had to stare for a minute to recognize her.

"Rosa," Ivy said, one eye on the spiky bowling ball tailing her. "Uh, what is that thing?"

When Rosa reached them, she looked back at the Pokémon following her as it rolled to a stop. Bits of splintered wood were stuck in between the sharp thorns that protruded from its compact body like a pincushion. Shifty, yellow eyes flitted between Rosa and her new companions, and it huddled close to Rosa's bare leg.

"Oh that's— Ouch! Ferroseed, watch it!"

Rosa kneeled down and carefully placed her fingers in between the sharp thorns on Ferroseed's head so as not to cut herself. The little Pokémon was trying to roll closer to her.

"Ferrah what now?"

"Ferroseed. It's a Pokémon I caught in Unova before coming out here." She hissed as Ferroseed slipped past her fingers and nearly rammed her with its spiky hide, but she caught it in time. "He's very affectionate."

"I can see that," Lyra said, smiling.

"Did you need us for something?" Ivy said.

"Yeah. I was just at the hospital. Lily and Ethan are doing much better, but the doctors have no idea what happened to Ash. They say they've never seen a case like his. I heard one of the nurses yelled at him for still being alive after whatever happened to him, believe it or not."

"Oh, I believe it. That sounds exactly like Ash."

"Anyway, I came to find you because Gary's awake. He's been asking for you."

"Really? Then I should go see him."

Ferroseed had calmed down and rolled closer to Lyra, blinking up at her. She offered it a hand, and Ferroseed rolled right into her.

"Ouch!" Lyra pulled back her hand, which was now bleeding from a few pricks on her palm.

"I'm so sorry," Rosa said. "Ferroseed, that's *enough*."

The spiny Pokémon looked back at Rosa a little guiltily, and Ivy laughed. "He just wants a hug."

"You're welcome to it, but don't complain to me when you come out of it with a punctured lung." Rosa recalled the attention-seeking Pokémon and shook her head.

"Are all of them like that?" Lyra said.

"If not, then Fate's having a hell of a laugh at my expense."

Ivy stood up and averted her gaze. "Cheer up, Rosa. There's worse

things than having a Pokémon that really loves you."

Lyra stood up and bit her lip, unsure what to say to that.

"...Of course," Rosa said softly. "Let's get back to the hospital."

Ivy tried to ignore the damper on the mood, knowing it hadn't been intentional, but she found herself with nothing to say. Lyra came to the rescue.

"So, Rosa, will you be heading back to Unova? We'll probably leave once Marco can travel, too."

"Yeah, that was the plan. I'm just waiting for Serperior to recover."

They walked in silence for a block and passed by a group of people working with a few Magmar to melt and reshape a section of lava that had covered the main street. The idea was to pave the new road over the lava instead of trying to remove it.

"Ivy," Rosa said all of a sudden. "Do you remember back in Saffron when we met, I asked you if you regretted leaving Team Rocket?"

Ivy frowned and took a moment to think. "...Yeah, I think I remember. Why?"

"I wonder if your answer's still the same after what's happened here. I heard that you had an encounter with someone from your old life."

At the reminder of Karen, Ivy crossed her arms and licked her lips. It was impossible now to think of Karen and not remember Umbreon's gruesome fate.

"Why do you ask?"

Rosa stopped walking, and Lyra stopped beside her. "Rosa?"

"Please," Rosa said. "Tell me your answer."

Ivy regarded the older girl, suddenly curious. "Why do you wanna know? Is there something you're not telling us? Did something happen?"

Try as she might, there was no getting a reading on Rosa. The girl was stone faced and implacable, a trait Ivy envied.

"Please, I'd like to know if you don't mind sharing."

There was a short pause as Ivy gathered her thoughts, though it was a question she'd been asking herself over the last few days while Gary slept. "Yes," she said finally. "I regret it. Karen was..." She struggled for the words. "She was like the mother I never had. Even at the end, there was a part of me that wished I could save her, that things coulda been different. She killed Umbreon just to make me suffer, and I still couldn't hate her. God I'm pathetic."

Lyra and Rosa remained silent and listened.

"But it doesn't matter if I regret it, even a little bit. She had to die, they all did." Ivy fixed Rosa with a hard stare. "They did unforgivable things, and they didn't care. Just because I loved her didn't mean I could let her live another day, not after what she did. What she represented."

"Marco said something like that when we found out he was Giovanni's son," Lyra said softly. "Ethan was so mad, he broke his hand punching a wall." There were tears in her eyes as she relived the memory. "He talked about you a lot, Ivy, said you were his family when he didn't have any. And when we found out he did have a father, he said it didn't matter. You can't choose who you love, and you can't choose your family. But you can choose how to live your life."

A knot wrenched in Ivy's throat despite herself. She rubbed her eyes, unwilling to shed tears in front of them. "That idiot," she played it off like it was no big deal. "Always showing me up and acting all wise and shit."

Rosa remained silent. Something in the way she stood very still and seemed to look without seeing held Ivy's attention. But before Ivy could say anything, Rosa resumed walking.

"Thanks, that...helps. C'mon, we should hurry up and get to the hospital."

Rosa led the rest of the way back to the hospital in a bit of a rush, and Ivy found herself following with Lyra. Neither of them spoke, but Ivy watched Rosa's back as she led the way, curious. Aside from what Oak had told them about Rosa, Ivy realized she knew next to nothing about the older girl. The thought disturbed her more now that Rosa had risked her life to help Ivy and her friends than it had before.

They were soon at the hospital and making their way to the recovery ward. The place was packed to the gills, and Blaine had ordered an expansion to the neighboring buildings to accommodate as many beds

as possible. The staff and civilian volunteers treated both Cinnabarean and Rocket soldiers as best they could. Ivy kept her gaze on Rosa's back as she passed by wounded Rocket Agents.

Gary and the others were in the back of the building, having been kept together upon request. The staff had curtained off a section of the room for them where they could have some privacy. When Ivy and the others arrived at their small section of the recovery ward, they found Ash in a hospital gown open at the back that revealed more than anyone wanted to see as he talked with a bedridden Agatha.

"Whoa there," Lyra said.

Ash and Agatha looked up from their conversation, and he smiled. "Hey, ladies."

"Ash, put some pants on if you're gonna be walking around. Do us all a favor," Ivy said.

"Huh? Oh. Well, whatever, it's a hospital. And it's so freakin' hot, anyway. If you can't keep your thirsty eyes off my body, then that's your problem."

Ivy flushed with rage and marched up to him. "What the fuck did you just say to me?"

Ash put up his hands, and before she could grab him by the collar, Gengar popped out of his chest and stuck its tongue out at her in a salacious grin. Ivy faltered, and it was only Lyra's steadying hand that kept her balanced.

"Ugh, nice to see you're feeling better."

"I see you haven't changed at all, Messor," Agatha said in her typical unpleasant way.

She was missing her left arm up past her elbow, and the stump was heavily bandaged. Days of lying motionless on a hospital bed and intravenous feeding had not done her any favors. Agatha was even more gaunt and sunken in all the wrong places than she was the last time Ivy had seen her. But there was something different about her, something less fearsome in those judging eyes that belied an exhaustion no amount of bedrest could cure. It made Ivy hesitate, and she swallowed the vituperative comeback that was on the tip of her tongue.

"Agatha," she said curtly.

Lyra went to see Ethan and Marco, who were just a few beds over from Ash and Agatha, while Rosa hung back.

"Where's Gary? I heard he was awake," Ivy said.

"Yeah, he was askin' for you, over there," Ash said.

He indicated a green curtain next to Agatha's bed, and Ivy walked around her to get to it. She pulled it back, and there was Gary lying on a stretcher hooked up to a multitude of machinery and in the same drab hospital gown as Ash. When he heard her pull back the curtains, he opened his eyes.

"Ivy," he rasped.

Espeon was curled up at the foot of his bed, and the sight of it stopped Ivy in her tracks for a breath. For a moment, she was sure she'd seen black fur instead of violet.

"I'm sorry about Umbreon," Gary said. "I dunno if I got the chance to say it. I'm so sorry."

Ivy smiled sadly and went to him. She found his hand and held it between hers. "And I'm sorry about the Professor. I wish you could've seen him one last time, at least."

His face was pulled tight and there were bags under his bloodshot eyes even now. Bandages were wrapped tightly around his head, but still his hair managed to poke out from under them where they criss-crossed. At the mention of Oak, he averted his gaze and clammed up, so she sat down on the edge of his bed and ran a hand over his cheek. He leaned into her touch and let his eyes drift closed.

"Can I tell you a secret?" he said softly.

"Of course."

"I wanted to kill Marco for what he did to you."

When she didn't respond, Gary opened his eyes.

"I've never wanted to kill someone so much, not even Will."

Ivy tried to keep her breathing normal and steady. "Why didn't you?"

He wasn't looking at her anymore, but at visions far away. "'Cause I knew you were dying, and I didn't wanna give those last moments to him instead of you."

Her hand fell to his shoulder and heat pooled behind her eyes. "Well, the important thing is you didn't kill him. In fact, you saved him."

Gary took her hand on his shoulder and brought it to his mouth to kiss the heel of her palm.

"Gary—"

"Don't, please. Let me have this, just for a little."

A few tears fell down her cheeks and dripped off her chin on his bed, but she let him have his moment.

"I love you, you know."

He looked up at her, green eyes wide with wonderment.

"I've loved you since Lavender, but after everything that happened in Saffron, I dunno. For a mind reader, you sure are slow."

"...I can't read your mind."

Ivy leaned over him. "Sure you can."

He hooked his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her down for a slow, sad kiss that she felt down to her toes.

"See?" she said when they parted.

He swallowed and searched her eyes. "Yeah. I think I do."

"Lily, how'd it go?" Ash said on the other side of the curtain.

Curious, Gary sat up in bed and Ivy got up to pull the curtain back. Ash was back in his bed next to Agatha with Pikachu in his lap and Gengar plopped down at the foot when Lily, dressed in an identical hospital gown, approached with a nurse. She dragged an IV stand behind her.

"Fine, I think, but this hospital dress thing is really getting on my nerves," Lily said. "Whose idea was it to have it open in the back? Did they forget that people have butts? I mean, this is ridiculous! They won't even let me wear my underwear, so I had to put on another

gown backwards under this one!"

Lily's left arm was in a sling and she had a few bandages on her face and around her middle, but she walked with ease and her Pikachu, as always, was along for the ride on her good shoulder. When it spotted Ash's Pikachu, it squeaked in delight and hopped onto Ash's bed.

Agatha remained silent and dour as she gave Lily a once-over. Ivy narrowed her eyes.

"Agatha, have you met Lily? She's the resident Titan of our group."

Agatha bristled. "We've met. And given recent events, I would think you of all people would be a little more understanding of my suspicions."

"Hey, c'mon guys," Ash said. "Let's not fight, okay? I'm sick of fighting."

"Nice to see you again, Agatha," Lily said with a small smile.

Agatha snorted. "What has the world come to?"

Lily thanked the nurse for her time and scooted back onto her own bed next to Ash's.

"Don't worry about Agatha," Ash said. "You get used to her." He paused before adding, "She's really great, I promise."

"If you think so, then I think so, too."

Agatha watched their exchange but said nothing.

"Hey Lily," Ivy said. "No word yet, but I got the doctors at the Pokémon Center to operate on Dody. I'll let you know as soon as they know anything."

Lily lit up. "Really? That's great, thank you! Oh, I hope she'll be okay. Dody's really a good bird, you know? Soon as I find some normal clothes, I'm gonna go see her and Nauty..."

She trailed off when she spotted Rosa near the curtain with her arms crossed, ever silent and watching.

"Rosa, I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Don't worry about it," Rosa said.

"All the same, I'm really sorry about your Beartic. If I coulda done something... I'm so sorry. You really loved him, didn't you?"

Ivy looked between the two young women, and something in the pit of her stomach clenched. Guilt constricted her throat as she understood Lily's meaning.

Why didn't she say anything before?

Rosa smiled sadly. "Yeah. I got him when he was just a little Cubchoo from Professor Juniper. He was a good companion. But nothing can survive an Electrode's Explosion. Don't blame yourself, it was my fault."

Ivy let her gaze fall, suddenly ashamed at how she'd snapped at Rosa earlier. Everyone had suffered in this war, some more than others.

Just then, Lyra reappeared pushing Marco in a wheelchair. Ethan was with her, both his arms strung up in slings. Nevertheless, he managed to be eating a roll that he held onto precariously with his thumb and forefinger.

"Marco."

Ivy looked back at Gary, but he nodded to her and she took that as the okay to leave him for now. She bypassed Agatha's bed and laid a hand on Marco's shoulder. His head and face were heavily bandaged and splotched with blood, and he had a blanket over his legs.

"Over here," he indicated his right side for her to stand. "I can't hear you on that side."

Ivy bit her lip, shocked at the wave of incandescent fury that swept through her at the thought of him being deaf and blind on his left side. He was confined to a wheelchair while his head healed, but the doctors weren't sure if he would ever walk properly again. Lyra smoothed some of his bangs out of his good eye, and he took her hand without a word.

"You know, even with one eye, you'll still be able to catch me sneakin' up on you," Ethan joked.

"That's because you're incapable of being quiet," Marco shot back, though he couldn't hide the hint of a smirk.

"Hey man, I know you're jealous that I always make an entrance, no

need to make up excuses for their benefit." He gestured to the rest of the room's occupants.

"True. Whenever you two bust in, Ethan's always the center of attention," Lyra quipped.

"You see what I have to put up with?" Marco said.

Ivy kneeled down so she was looking up at him and smiled. "Yeah. Guess we found some strays on our way after all, huh?"

He blinked and did his best to return her smile. "More like they found us." He turned then to Lily and addressed her directly. "You."

Lily looked behind her quickly to make sure he didn't have the wrong person. "Me?"

"Yes, you. Lily, right?"

"Yeah..."

"Can you... Can you come over here for a minute? I'm not very mobile right now."

Lily and Ash exchanged a look, and Gengar hopped onto her bed on its stubby legs and plopped down beside her. But she slipped off the bed and Gengar frowned, having just situated itself. Gingerly, she approached Marco.

"What can I do for you?"

He looked up at her, and Ivy was sure she saw her shiver a little. She'd heard the story of how Lily had faced the red Gyarados and Marco himself while Rosa and Blaine dealt with Team Rocket, but she couldn't imagine what Marco would have to say to her now. He wasn't the type to hold a grudge when she'd only done what was necessary while he was being controlled.

"You can accept this." He held out his hand, and in the palm rested a small Badge in the shape of a delicate leaf. It was only about an inch long, but it was inlaid with jade and finished in gold.

Lily frowned and reached for the Badge. "What is it? And why're you giving it to me? Did I do something wrong?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

Lily blushed. "You're not the first person to tell me that."

"That's the Earth Badge. Giovanni, that is, my...father," he swallowed, "was the Viridian City Gym Leader. He used his position as a way to give Team Rocket access to Kanto through a reputable network. I was supposed to inherit everything—Team Rocket, the Gym, everything. And when he...well, when I killed him, everything passed to me.

"You stood up to me when no one else did. If you hadn't stopped Gyarados, she would've probably turned the war for Team Rocket. I was so preoccupied with you that I didn't have time to worry about the Cinnabarean soldiers. I don't even know how many lives you saved by coming after me directly."

"What? No, it wasn't really like that, I just happened to be there is all. I'm sure if it was Ivy or Ethan or somebody else—"

"But it wasn't somebody else. It was you. I hear you're a Titan, and that's why you could control my Gyarados. But you did more than that; you stopped her, and you stopped me from killing countless innocent people. I know it probably doesn't mean much coming from a legal loophole, but technically I'm the current Viridian Gym Leader. So I'm offering you the Earth Badge as proof of what you did for all the people in this hospital, and for what you did for me. Now hurry up and take it."

Lily held up the small Badge to catch the light. "I dunno what to say...except thank you. And I'm really glad you're yourself again." She smiled shyly.

"Excuse me, Marco?" a nurse said, pulling back the curtain and poking her head in. "Oh, I didn't mean to interrupt."

Lyra pushed Marco's wheelchair toward the waiting nurse, and Ivy stood up.

"We just finished," Marco said.

"Well, if you're up for it, I'd like to go ahead and administer the next round of treatment. One more and you should be well enough to start walking around again— Oh, you there, Ivy! The doctor's been looking everywhere for you. You never showed up for your blood work this morning."

Ivy backed away. "Didn't I? Hah, sorry, musta slipped my mind."

The nurse frowned. "Well, please don't go anywhere. I'll let the doctor know you're here now."

"Really, I'm fine. You don't have to run anymore tests."

The nurse wasn't having any of it. "I'm sorry, but from the report I gathered, you experienced heart failure followed by an emergency Softboiled treatment administered on the battlefield. By all accounts you should not have survived, so I'm sure you'll understand our desire to monitor your condition."

Before Ivy could get another word in, the nurse shooed Lyra away from Marco's wheelchair and took up the position herself.

"Now then, we'll just pop out to see the doctor and get you fixed up."

The nurse left with Marco, and no one said a word for several moments.

"Ivy," Rosa said. "Is that true what she said? About how you died out there for a while?"

"Wait a minute, it sounds really creepy when you put it like that. Obviously, I couldn't have died since I'm still here." She gestured to Lyra. "Blissey's Softboiled saved me."

"No, it didn't," Gary said.

Everyone turned to look at him as he sat up in bed.

"Lyra, you said so yourself that you were too late administering the Softboiled egg."

Lyra nodded. "That's right."

Ivy looked back at Lyra. "But I'm still here, so obviously it worked. Softboiled's s'posed to be able to heal any injury, right?"

"Well yeah, that's true, but... Ivy, nothing either people or Pokémon can do can revive the dead. What happened with you out there... It was nothing short of a miracle."

"Agatha? Are you okay?" Ash said.

Agatha was trembling and clutching her stump, eyes wide. Sensing her agitation, her two Gengar and Mismagius appeared above her and began to roil in distress. Rosa reached for her, but Agatha jerked

away.

She struggled to sit up properly in bed. "I knew it would come to this. The minute I laid eyes on you, Messor, I knew it. You're all the same."

"Now wait just a goddamned minute." Ivy glared at Agatha. "From the moment I met you, you've been nothing but mean and suspicious of me for absolutely no reason. Fine, I don't give a shit what you think about me. But you don't know me. I'm *nothing* like Karen; that's why I lived and she died."

"Agatha, what's the matter? You know Ivy's one of us, and she's got a point," Ash said.

Agatha shook her head. "You don't understand. She should be dead, but she's not."

"Is that a threat?" Ivy's hand fisted the skirt of her sundress, ready to hike it up and get to the knife she'd holstered to her thigh.

"What do you mean, dead?" Ethan said.

Agatha remained silent for a few moments. Her Ghosts gathered around her, a mass of dark clouds with eyes and hidden teeth. Ash's Gengar hopped back to his bed and watched them, but dared not creep too close.

"Agatha?" Ash said.

She deflated and withdrew her claws, though her craggy face remained ever warped in an eternal grimace. Ivy relaxed a little at the abated threat and let her skirt fall around her knees.

"Tea, please," Agatha said finally.

Ash moved around her bed to the small tray that had been set up next to it and filled her cup from the steaming kettle. Gengar tried to swipe at the falling liquid, but its gaseous hand passed right through it and the Ghost hissed in pain from the heat. Ash gave it a look that said, "What did you expect?" and Gengar frowned dramatically. Agatha laid back against her pillows with her Ghosts gathered about her lap in their corporeal forms.

"I'm sensing a story coming on," Ash said. "Did you have a bad run-in with a Reaper back in the day?"

"I count myself lucky that in my youth traveling the continent, my encounters with Reapers were minimal. They were always hostile, of course. No exceptions. But Sam...asked me to help you." She turned to Gary. "All three of you. It was his last wish." She paused to collect herself and clutched her stump closer to her chest. "I can't do much anymore, but I can tell you what I should have when we first met. Maybe then things will be a bit clearer to you all. Maybe...you'll understand."

"We're listening," Gary said.

Agatha shifted her accusatory gaze to Ivy once more. "Messor, I know you think me cantankerous and rigid. I don't deny it. No use changing at my age. But I'm not the only one you've encountered that flinches at the stench of you."

It took every ounce of willpower—and the flash of warning in Ash's eyes—not to lash out at Agatha. She gritted her teeth. "I don't care what people think of me."

"No, but perhaps you'd care to know why."

"All right, I'll humor you for them." She indicated Ash and Gary. "So go on, then. Why're you so afraid of me?"

"Because you're the only person in this room that has died and lived to tell about it. You cannibalized Karen's darkness when you killed her, and that same darkness saved you from your own demise."

"C-Cannibalized?" Lily said. "You don't mean literally, like..."

Ethan dropped the roll he'd been munching on.

Ivy almost wanted to laugh. "Wow. I've been called a lotta things, but this is a first. At least the other names I earned for a reason. Maybe you really are going senile, Agatha."

"Hold your tongue, insolent girl. Do you want to learn the truth about yourself or not?"

Ivy said nothing and simmered in silence. Agatha took it as tacit acceptance and continued.

"As I was saying, you stole Karen's darkness and offered it up to the original Reaper in exchange for your life, just as many of your kind have done before you. That's why Messor are widely hated and feared.

You murder your own kind to extend your life beyond its natural expectancy. Imagine, for example, a Messor who cannibalizes so many of his kind that he gains a kind of immortality. He would be an aberration, a creature of chaos so dark and deep, even his own kind would run in fear of him."

"That's messed up," Ethan said. "Shit."

Ivy was suddenly uncomfortably cold. "No, no you're wrong. That's not me."

"It's the legacy you've inherited, whether you accept it or not," Agatha said.

"Original Reaper?" Gary said, his tone betraying nothing of his inner thoughts.

"An old legend, but like all legends, this one begins with the truth. You died and reclaimed life because it's what you were created to do."

"Created?" Lyra said. "Wait, you mean..."

"Yes. Unlike most of you, Reapers aren't born; they're made. Just as Karen made you."

Like a punch to the gut, Ivy lost the ability to breathe for a moment. Goosebumps prickled her flesh, and she had the urge to hug her bare arms to her chest. She saw a vision of Karen, hunched and hideously twisted under Tyranitar's Earthquake, those dark eyes trained on her.

Karen...made me?

"Bullshit," Ivy said, swallowing the lump in her throat.

"It's true. Most Tamers are born. They inherit their ability from a parent or close relative, the way Gary inherited his Clairvoyance from Sam. But Reapers are made, just as Mediums and Magi are made."

"Whoa, wait, me too?" Ash said.

His Pikachu perked up and squeaked up at him.

Agatha sipped her tea. The cup shook a bit in her spindly hand. "Yes, you and me both. And Magi, the Fairy Tamers of old. Together, the three of them were the first Tamers from which all the rest evolved. Or so the legend goes."

"You said you wanted to help," Ivy said. "This is definitely *not* helping. And I'm not what you're saying I am. I didn't even know this when I...when I killed Karen."

Agatha turned up her beak-like nose. "On the subject of your ignorance, you'll find no argument from me."

"Well, I don't really care if I was made or born or whatever," Ash said. "If it wasn't for Gengar, Lorelei woulda turned me into a popsicle."

"I care," Gary said softly, gaze hard and unreadable as he scrutinized Agatha from his bed. Espeon looked up from its snooze, suddenly on high alert as it eyed Gary. "Agatha, I think you better tell us why this is suddenly so important."

Agatha took another sip of her piping hot tea and rested the cup on her lap. Her two Gengar made a game out of catching the steam while the placid Mismagius looked on, uninterested.

"The original Reaper," she explained in her deadpan, raspy tone, "also known as Death, for those of you who are slower on the uptake. Like all things, this story begins and ends with Death. But most people shrink in fear from the concept, so our ancestors gave Death another name, one they could envision as a creature of flesh and blood itself susceptible to death—Yveltal.

"This is where the legend wanders into the realm of the fantastical. Yveltal is the name given to a Pokémon, a colossal bird wet with the blood of its victims and dark wings that could bring the night with a single, mighty flap. The story goes that Yveltal, the original Reaper, became greedy for souls and stole so much life that people and Pokémon nearly died out entirely to feed its hunger. Yveltal would have exterminated the entire human race if not—"

Agatha coughed suddenly and spilled some of her tea. Ash steadied her shoulder and took her cup while she heaved. She tried to wave him off, but he held onto her cup until she calmed down.

"If not for the blue hart, Xerneas," she said after a few rattling breaths. "Like Yveltal, Xerneas is the name the ancients gave the original Magus and the incarnation of Life. It used all its power to restore the lives Yveltal had stolen."

"Huh? Wait, so you're saying these two super Pokémon killed everyone then brought 'em all back? Why'd they do that? Seems like a zero-sum game to me," Ethan said.

"Shall I sit here as a convenient target for your asinine questions, or will you allow me to finish the story sometime today?"

Ethan's ears turned red with shame, and Lyra elbowed him lightly.

"Sorry," he muttered.

Agatha shook her head. "Anyway, Xerneas didn't have the power to restore all the lives that were taken, so some brave souls offered to remain dead so that others, children and innocents ripped from life long before their time, could live in their stead. Xerneas couldn't restore them to their former selves, but in exchange for their sacrifice, it granted them life anew by imparting a piece of its own power to them. They were reborn into the world as the first human Magi. As the inheritors of Xerneas's will, the Magi went on to create more life and rebuild the world. That is, until they ironically all died out. Their descendents became the first Clairvoyants, Ignifers, Sylvans, and Syreni.

"But some of the souls Yveltal had stolen didn't want to be restored at all."

Lily shivered. "Who would wanna stay dead?"

"Those who don't fear Death. And, perhaps, those who recognized themselves in Death's image. Death is a lonely existence, and all living things are destined to die alone and in darkness. It takes a special brand of courage, or perhaps madness, to embrace that ultimate unknown."

Ivy caught Gary watching her, and as usual she got the uncanny sensation that somewhere deep down, he really could read her thoughts even though he denied it.

"Yveltal rewarded the souls that agreed to keep it company by imparting its power to them. Thus, they returned to the land of the living imbued with Death's blessing with the promise to return to darkness in the end."

"The first Reapers," Ivy said softly.

"Yes. From them came Deaths' derivative incarnations—Veleno, Crystallos, Volucris, Adamantine, and Caelifer."

"You mentioned the Magi all died out," Rosa said. "You mean they're extinct?"

"For centuries."

"Are you sure?"

"If any are still alive today, they're in deep hiding. But the chances are infinitesimally small. The last Magus died close to four hundred years ago in Kalos. Suicide, like all the others."

All the others. The ominous revelation echoed in Ivy's head like the aftershock of a grenade.

"All the others," Rosa repeated. "They *all* committed suicide? Why?"

"They went mad. Some power...isn't meant for humans to comprehend, much less dare to wield themselves."

"Creepy," Ethan whispered to Lyra.

Ash frowned. "Well, what about us? You said Mediums like you 'n me're also made. Where'd we come from?"

"And us," Lyra said. "You haven't mentioned Atlas or Fulmen, either."

Agatha warmed her fingers around her tea cup. "Ash, you and I come from those who neither Yveltal nor Xerneas wanted. Among the lives Yveltal stole were those on the brink of death, their natural lives expired but not quite past the final threshold. With nowhere else to go, those wandering spirits possessed the most malleable vessels they could find—human children. Those children became the first Mediums.

"As you know, hosting a Ghost is taxing on the body. So in exchange for the perpetual haunting, the child Mediums gained extraordinary powers of longevity. As for you," she addressed Lyra and Ethan. "The first Mediums didn't create anything because we *are* nothing. A void can't create or destroy anything, it just is. But nature's response to our corrupted existed created Atlas, Bellators, and Fulmen, the Tamers that can evade a Ghost's ghoulish touches either because they're immune or because they defy Life and Death entirely."

"Surge," Gary said. "He survived that massive Thunderbolt back in Saffron."

"Wait a minute," Lily said all of a sudden. "What about people like me? You didn't say where Titans came from."

"Oh yeah, what's up with that?" Ash said.

"What is 'up' with that is that Titans aren't Tamers at all, not like the rest of us," Agatha sneered. "Their ilk's got nothing to do with our origin myth."

Lily frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means the first Titans were the sons and daughters of Dragons. The three dynasties that remain today all claim to have Dragonsblood in their veins, and that's why Dragons and their descendants can't defy them. A load of codswallop if you ask me."

Lily looked at her hands, small and nimble like a surgeon's. "Dragonsblood? Then that means Lance has it, too."

"What do you know about Lance?" Agatha snapped.

"Lance," Ethan said. "Wait, *that* Lance? Like, Scary Clair's cousin, Lance?"

"Don't call her that. Clair's the reason we made it to Kanto at all." Lyra swatted him on his broken shoulder, and Ethan hissed in pain.

"Ow!"

"Clair's not the scary one." Marco pulled back the curtain where a nurse had wheeled him back after his treatment. "It's Lance himself we should be worried about."

"Marco." Lyra went to him and pushed his chair back into the room.

He sat stiffly, but there was more color in his cheeks than there had been earlier.

"Lance is a traitor," Agatha spat. "All the Elite Four are."

"Hey, where *is* Lance?" Ash said. "Sounds like we met the rest of the Elite Four, but he wasn't here?"

Lily was still staring at her hand, eyes vacant and unfocused. Ivy frowned, suspicious.

"No, that was never part of the plan," Marco said. Shifting in his chair, he winced and tried to get a bit more comfortable. The bandages around his left eye and ear were fresh. "When I was with Team Rocket, I learned about my...Giovanni's plans. But like we found out at

the Lake of Rage," he nodded to Ethan and Lyra, "they weren't even his plans to begin with."

"What do you mean? What'd you find out?" Ivy said.

"That the true leader of Team Rocket isn't Giovanni at all. He's a a Johto Gym Leader, Pryce of Mahogany Town. But Ivy and me knew him better by his alias—the Masked Man."

"*What*? The Masked Man was a Gym Leader the whole time?"

"Yeah," Ethan said. "After Lyra 'n me joined up with Marco, we figured out pretty quick that the Johto Gym Leaders weren't gonna go up against Team Rocket. So we decided to kick 'em in the balls where it'd hurt most instead. Maximum damage, you know."

"By the time we got to the Lake of Rage," Marco went on, "we'd discovered the truth about the Masked Man—Pryce—and his role as Team Rocket's true leader. But that's not all."

"It's not?" Lyra said.

"No, I was meaning to tell you this when I was better, but I don't think it should wait any longer. When I was with Team Rocket, I found out about the Silver Wing project."

"The Silver Wing," Lily said. "I was working on that in Saffron. Do you know what happened?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Giovanni commissioned it for a superior. I was with him when he made the drop. He handed it over to Lance."

Ethan groaned. "I know I'm gonna regret askin', but what's the Silver Wing and why did G-Man hand it over to Lance?"

"He handed it over because Pryce told him to. Pryce was the one that came up with the project in the first place. See, he already knew it was possible to control a legendary Pokémon. All he needed was a way to call on it for the right price. For a chance to have a legendary Pokémon do his bidding, Lance was willing to pay it."

"Then it's true," Ivy said. "The Masked Man... Pryce, whatever. He really does have a Ho-oh."

Marco nodded grimly. "Yeah, he does."

"Lugia," Lily said. "That's what Dr. Santos called it, the legendary

Pokémon. You're saying... You mean it's real? Lance can use the Silver Wing to summon it? But why?"

Marco shook his head. "That, I don't know."

"Lance," Agatha said more to herself than to the others. "All this for a taste of power." Her Ghosts began to fret in agitation as her emotions raged. "Bruno, and then Sam... All for some narcissistic fantasy..."

"So lemme get this straight," Ash said. "Lance, the badass Elite Four Champion who's s'posed to keep the peace between Kanto and Johto's actually the whole reason we're fighting Team Rocket? And Lavender, and Saffron, Fuchsia... All that goes back to him. All those people, the Pokémon, Chimera." He was shaking with unbridled rage. "Pallet Town, my mom... All 'cause of this one asshole. That's what you're tellin' me?"

Marco averted his gaze. "That's one way to look at it."

Ash turned his rage on Agatha. "You know him. Did you know? Did you know about Pallet? About any of this?"

Agatha just stared, blinking. Ash's Gengar, vicariously agitated as Ash's emotions got the better of him, grew into a sinister cloud over his shoulders that spread like poison. Lyra and Ethan backed off, and even Pikachu whimpered. Rosa had a white-knuckled grip on one of her Pokéballs and looked ready to bolt.

"You were one of them! The Elite Four, sworn to protect the continent and keep us outta war, right? What a fucking joke!"

Ivy stepped forward. "Ash, calm down."

"Calm? How can I be calm? How can *any* of you be calm? The system, it's all a lie. And for what?" Ash bared his teeth at Ivy. "What'd we even do any of this for? What'd we actually accomplish, huh?"

"Ash." Lily took his hand in hers and searched his eyes.

He avoided her gaze, but Gengar began to recede slowly. "I'm so sick of this. I'm so sick of a few assholes thinking they can screw up people's lives and torture Pokémon and all the other crap we've been dealing with over the past year. And for what, some fucking power trip? 'Cause they're bored?" He pulled off his hat and crushed it in his free hand. "I swear, I'm gonna put a stop to this. Somehow, Lance and anybody else who's involved is goin' down."

"No, *we* will," Lily said. "I'm responsible, at least in part. I'm gonna stop him, too."

"How do you stop a legendary Pokémon?" Lyra said. "Ho-oh, Lugia, it all seems a little impossible."

"No, it's the opposite," Gary said. "It's necessarily possible. That's what he meant, back in Pewter. It wasn't just a legend—they stopped Lugia once before."

"Pewter? What're you talking about? Who stopped Lugia?" Ash said.

Gary looked between Ash and Ivy. "The Triumvirate. Articuno, Zapdos, and Moltres."

26. Cinnabar Island, Part 6

Triumvirate, chapter 26: Cinnabar Island, Part 6
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

The smells of pine and iron were redolent even in the sooty, sunken basement of the Burned Tower. The citizens of Ecruteak had called it that for ages, its true name having been lost to taboo and the time that magnified it with each passing generation. It had burned down ages ago, and no one dared rebuild it. No one wanted to summon the wrath of the one that had rained holy fire upon it in its vengeance, even after all this time. Time goes on and people, their sins, the past itself evanesce; but myths only fester and grow, cancerous.

Morty did not dread the omens and portents of doom supposedly bestowed upon those who dared tread foot on these hallowed grounds. Crumbling and dilapidated, the Burned Tower's basement level had long ago succumbed to the elements and hosted life anew, from prickly Paras that hid in the shadows and burrowed in the rich, ashen soil to Hoppip that floated in the remains of the moss-laden rafters and spun fine beds of silk in between them for their young. But it was not the poetic symbol for life after death the Burned Tower had become that lured him here today. Like every day he spent here among the ashes and pale glass grass as tall as a man's waist, Morty had come for them—the statues.

There were three, carved from weathered stone and partially swallowed by the reclaimed earth and glass grass. He stood before the middle statue, perched proudly atop its pedestal and damp with condensation. The beast's mane was bushy as a cloud and trailed the length of its body. Two fangs, each as long as a dagger, snarled down at Morty as he gazed up at the still statue.

Behind it, a purple shadow billowed up from the glass grass and settled over the statue like a veil.

"Not yet, Misdreavus," Morty said.

A deformed, rotted skull clacked within the gathering mists until it gave them shape. Red eyes blinked down at Morty, and the Ghost drifted over the statue's broad head toward him. He reached out a hand for it, and Misdreavus happily floated up his arm to settle at his shoulder. Soft, violet light rose from his skin and clothes, and his dark eyes bled purple. Before his enhanced Sight, the three statues seemed

to glow with an inner light all their own, as though they weren't statues at all, but relics of the beasts for whom they had been carved long ago.

A tingling suspicion tickled the back of his neck, and Morty turned back the way he'd come. There was no one there, but there would be shortly. He cast a last look back at the menacing, stone beast—Entei, the ancients had called it. Chipped, stone eyes trained on his back, lifeless and unseeing, but they watched him go all the same until the next time he would visit.

Outside the Burned Tower, the cool, sweet air filled his lungs. The structure sat just off the base of Mt. Mortar, high enough to feel the altitude but low enough to make the hike there and back from Ecruteak manageable in half a day. He usually set out before dawn to spend some hours just sitting with the three beast statues before heading back in the late morning, when the air was freshest.

A soft giggling sound, like cloth ripping, followed him through the tall glass grass and shook the pale blades. Morty stopped and looked down at the straggler tailing him.

"You were gone a while."

He kneeled down so he was eye to eye with the short Pokémon. Banette narrowed its red eyes at Morty and smiled so wide, its woven jaw ripped at the seams. Black tar leaked from its mouth in the form of a noxious gas, and Misdreavus hissed over Morty's shoulder at the stench. Morty was less disturbed and tugged gently at the zipper embedded in Banette's cheek. Slowly, he zipped the Pokémon's mouth closed, locking the malignant Ghost inside its chosen, cloth prison. Stitched hands that tapered like too-long sleeves wrapped around Morty's arm and ripped his sleeve, but he didn't mind and picked Banette up.

Unlike the gaseous Misdreavus, Banette fit snugly in Morty's arms as though it were a nothing but an ordinary ragdoll, solid and corporeal. Only its eyes belied the Ghost that haunted the unwanted puppet, as Misdreavus haunted Morty himself.

"You came back just in time," Morty said, violet-shaded eyes sleepy as he looked down on Ecruteak City nestled at the base of Mt. Mortar. "We have company."

The hike back was fast with Misdreavus's Aura giving him the advantage of speed and distance. Morty leaped through the air, easily

covering fifty feet in a single, horizontal jump forward. The wind chilled his throat and cheeks despite the late summer season—it was always a little chilly in Ecruteak. His blond hair snapped against his cheeks and forehead and left faint, red lines in the skin. It was long enough to fall prey to the wind, too short to tie back properly, and altogether too much of a hassle to bother with. He made it back to the outskirts of Ecruteak in record time. Foregoing the hike back was a shame, but he had a feeling his expected guests would not be keen on waiting.

Walking once more, Morty let Banette hop down to stroll along beside him and made his way down the cobblestone streets toward the Gym, hands in his pockets. People greeted him kindly as he went by, but no one got too close. Some children were playing with sticks and using them as make-believe swords to duel in someone's front yard. Banette saw them and hopped up on the short, metal fence that separated the yard from the road and grinned at them. A little boy who was watching the duel caught sight of the Ghost and yelped, alerting the other children. They dropped their sticks and backed away toward the house as Banette followed them with its bloody eyes. Morty walked by and nodded to the kids.

"Good morning," he said politely.

The kids, no more than ten or eleven, bowed to Morty and wished him good morning. One of the kids' mothers, a short woman wearing oven mitts and holding a steaming tray of cookies, appeared on the raised, wooden porch just then.

"Oh, Morty, sir, good morning to you. Would you like one? I just pulled them out of the oven," the woman offered.

Morty smiled waved to Banette. "No, thank you. I have business at the Gym. I apologize for interrupting the children's play. It looked like they were having fun."

The woman dipped her head respectfully. "No trouble at all. If you change your mind, do come back."

Morty let his gaze linger on the huddled kids for a moment. The one that had spotted Banette, the smallest of the group, tugged on his mother's pant leg, eyes wide. Banette hopped off the railing and waddled back to Morty, its scratchy cloth legs *scrip, scrip, scrip*ping as it walked.

"Mommy, what was that thing?" he heard one of the kids say.

"Watch your tongue," the woman said. "That Pokémon belongs to Morty, our Gym Leader. I won't have you saying nasty things about him, am I understood?"

"But it was awful! Didya see those red eyes?"

"It's a *Ghost*, dummy," one of the bigger kids said.

"That's enough, all of you," the woman said as she shooed the boys back inside. "The Ghosts keep us safe, and you'd do well to remember that..."

The rest of the conversation trailed off as Morty continued on toward the Gym. He thought little of the children's fear. It was only natural for them, just as it had been for him when he was their age, when the Ghosts first found him. Fifteen years later and the fear sometimes snuck up on him, too.

Something tugged on his pant leg, just as the little boy had tugged on his mother. Banette grinned up at him through its zippered mouth.

"No," Morty said. "The children in this city are off-limits. You know that."

The Ghost's disappointment sent a cold snap up his leg and made it cramp up. Morty frowned and held out a hand for Banette.

"It's okay, Banette," he said, biting back the malevolent hatred that clung to him. "I'll never throw you away. I promise."

Just like that, the Ghost's grudge abated and it skipped alongside him, making a game out of jumping in between the cracks in the cobblestone. Misdreavus floated down beside it, curious about Banette's newest dalliance, though in its gaseous form it could not partake of the game. Morty shoved his hands back in his pockets and breathed deeply. He thought about Agatha. It had been a couple years since the old Medium had last visited Ecruteak to check up on him. Even with her guidance and the tried and true test of time and patience, it was a lot to handle alone.

The Ecruteak Gym loomed ahead, three stories of polished wood and shoji with sloping rooftops and two small sentry posts at the east and west ends, where archers could hole up and attack from above. One was occupied now, but not by an archer. Misdreavus hissed up at the large owl perched on the edge of the sentry post with its back to Morty, but at the Ghost's threat it turned its head 180 degrees around

to glare down its back.

"Falkner," Morty said. He paused and angled his head to the side before adding, "You got here fast."

A young man sat on the raised, wooden porch that stretched around the Gym chewing on a strip of seasoned jerky. His dark hair fell into his eyes, fashionable in a way Morty could never hope to emulate with his natural, etiolated pallor. A small Xatu with sharp eyes perched next to him, cleaning its multicolored feathers with a practiced beak.

"I get everywhere fast." Falkner chewed off a final bite of his jerky before tossing it to the side. Xatu caught it lightning fast and ripped into it with beak and talon.

"I wasn't talking to you."

Falkner frowned, but before he could discern Morty's true meaning, a tall woman dressed all in black and a cape walked casually toward them from her spot half hidden behind a thick tree. Her blue hair was pulled back in a tight, high ponytail and matched her chilling eyes. She moved with all the confidence and threat of a hunter in peak physical condition, the rippled contours in her armor molded to her muscles. Falkner got to his feet and immediately shifted his annoyance from Morty to the woman, the men's senior in both age and skill, though Falkner would never admit it out loud.

Falkner's animosity was not without merit, Morty supposed. It started the day he became Violet City's Gym Leader after his father was killed suddenly by rampaging Graveler on Route Forty-Eight. He'd been too young for the job then, just eighteen and half-cocked, full of ambition and self-importance. Clair, the Blackthorn City Gym Leader, had stood before him then as she did now, as dispassionate and stolid as a statue, and handed him the Zephyr Badge, stained red with his father's blood from the body her trainers had recovered south of Blackthorn.

"*Congratulations,"* she'd said. *"You're the new Violet City Gym Leader."*

The first thing Falkner did as Gym Leader was run Clair and her people out of Violet City, determined to take up his father's mantle by his own right, not by Blackthorn's decree. But three years didn't change him much, in the end. His temper remained the same, though time had reduced the boil to a potent simmer and given him a chance to learn to fly higher. And fly higher he did, until the fateful day he met a boy who could fly just as high.

Clair regarded Morty and nodded curtly. "I left as soon as I heard about the events on Cinnabar. Ethan and Lyra will have been there for the fighting."

"And Marco?" Falkner said. "Or is he below your radar?"

Clair's fiery, red aura flared briefly at Falkner's tone, but her face remained a mask of placid indifference. "The last my sources heard, he was headed for Cinnabar under Team Rocket's control. I'm sure by now they've all been happily reunited."

Morty stepped in between them before Falkner said something they would both regret. "Let's hope so. He has the Clear Bell. Without it, we can't move against Pryce."

Clair bristled at the mention of that name. "All the more reason to get moving before that limp dick old codger can stir up what's left of his emaciated Rocket army. Are you ready?"

Her obscenities didn't faze Morty, instead igniting a small fire of fury at the thought of Pryce and the crimes he'd committed against Johto for personal gain. "Of course. Falkner?"

Falkner sneered. "The only reason I agreed to help with this is because of Marco. After this is over, I'm done with you." His dark eyes bored into Clair.

Her painted lips curled in an unkind smile that accentuated her almost unnaturally angular cheekbones. "That's what you said the last time, little bird, and look at us now."

Morty reached a hand toward Falkner before he could blow up at her. "Who will I be flying with?"

Caught a little off guard, Falkner grumbled something nasty under his breath but tossed Morty a Pokéball from his belt. "Pidgeot's level-headed and calm. She'll get you to Cinnabar smoothly, but keep your Ghosts outta sight unless you wanna get thrown."

Morty released the Pokéball, and Falkner's Pidgeot coalesced in the light. A magnificent specimen, Pidgeot towered nearly four feet over Morty's head to the top of its thick crest and cooed pleasantly. Its glossy, autumn feathers revealed the care with which Falkner had raised it. Another light flashed, and a fearsome Skarmory landed next to Pidgeot. While smaller and leaner by comparison, the iron bird had a wintry sharpness to it that made it uncomfortable to look upon for

too long. Falkner's armor and thick, leather gloves bore scuffs and scratches where Skarmory's steely feathers scraped hard enough to slice through bare skin. Banette stumbled backward as it looked up at the towering birds, awed by their size.

"Sorry, but Fearow has a new litter to take care of, so these're the only Flyers I brought," Falkner said, not sorry at all. "Guess you'll have to walk to Cinnabar, Clair."

Clair shrugged her thick, black cape over her shoulder and revealed a line of Pokéballs at her belt. She selected one and twirled it in her gloved fingers. "I appreciate your concern," she said, completely unappreciative, "but I think I can manage."

"It's no hop, skip, and a jump to Cinnabar from here," Falkner said, smirking. "Not just any Flyer can make the journey non-stop."

Clair tossed out the Pokéball she'd selected, and from within the light a colossal Dragonite reared its head. Twenty-five feet tall and covered in dewey, amber scales, the monstrous Dragon hunkered down on all fours and growled. Earth and cobblestone cracked and smashed under its sharp, bone talons. Pidgeot ruffled its feathers and hopped backward, spooked, until Falkner laid a hand on its flank to soothe it. Morty whistled in awe. He'd never been this close to a Dragonite before.

"Like I said," Clair said as she ran a hand along Dragonite's gleaming hide. "I'll manage."

Dragonite lowered its stout head to her eye level and blinked dark, intelligent eyes at her. They locked gazes for a moment, and Morty wondered what it must be like to be a Titan. They were not true Tamers, according to Agatha, but descendents of Dragons themselves, if the stories were to be believed. Growing up the son of a temple priest, Morty had always had a fondness for stories, the more impossible the better.

"Mortimer," Clair said. "I didn't come here to put on a show. Every minute I'm away from Blackthorn puts my city at risk of invasion from Mahogany."

He winced at her use of his full name. "Of course, Clair. We're ready to leave."

She climbed into the saddle strapped to her Dragonite's back just as some of the Ecruteak townspeople emerged from their houses to gawk

at the sight of a Dragon in their sleepy town. Like Morty, none of them had probably seen an honest to god Dragonite before. He couldn't help but smile as Misdreavus joined in his sentiment.

How strange not to be the focus of people's morbid ogling for once.

He shrugged off his backpack and unzipped the large pocket, where Banette would ride for the duration of the trip. The dirty ragdoll Pokémon was happy to snuggle in among Morty's clean clothes and rations, which he'd resigned himself long ago to accept with little fuss. Falkner's Noctowl swooped down from the sentry post atop the Gym and joined Xatu on the ground.

"Ready to fly?"

Skarmory squawked, a horrible screeching sound that made Morty wince and Misdreavus dissolve into gas.

Clair didn't wait and guided Dragonite upwards. It was airborne in three great flaps of its blue wings and a mighty gust that nearly knocked Morty down.

"Che, what a frigid bitch," Falkner grumbled under his breath.

Morty settled onto Pidgeot's back as the bird shifted nervously in the wake of Dragonite's ascent.

"Better not let her hear you say that," he cautioned the younger Gym Leader. "Besides, she's not so bad when you get to know her."

"I'll pass. Titans're all two-faced, anyway, so no point."

"Clair's trustworthy enough, you can take it from me. And we need her, besides. When it comes right down to it, Blackthorn and the Dragon Tamers're the only thing standing in the way of Pryce's ambitions."

Falkner snorted. "For now, maybe, but once we get those three back here with the Clear Bell, his ass is grass." He paused before adding, "You know, it coulda been us to wake up the beasts."

Morty sighed. "You know what they say about pride and falling?"

Falkner smirked in a way that made him handsome even to Morty's tired eyes. On some level, he supposed, he envied the kid's youth and vigor.

"Nope. I *never* fall."

He raised his arm, and Skarmory took off without him. It swooped around high over the Gym, then headed back to Falkner and Morty fifteen feet above the ground. Falkner lowered his goggles over his eyes and, with a last salute to Morty, jumped and rode the air currents high overhead as though he were a bird himself. Skarmory squawked again and swooped under him, and he landed on the iron bird's back on his feet, as though it were a surfboard he was riding and not a razor-sharp raptor. Xatu and Noctowl took off flying after him, and Pidgeot lurched, eager to take to the skies. Morty didn't have time to ogle Falkner's ostentatious display when he was jostled in the saddle and hurled into the air upon Pidgeot's back.

Ecruteak Gym fell away below him as Pidgeot climbed higher and quickly caught up to Skarmory and Falkner, who had mercifully taken a seat like a normal person. Clair soared a ways ahead on Dragonite, heading southeast toward Cinnabar across the Sea of Seasons. Morty watched the city his granduncle had entrusted to his care upon his deathbed shrink below, a swath of deep indigos and browns surrounded by stone and pine. Burned Tower seemed a mere smudge on the landscape next to the mighty Tin Tower west of it.

This better work, he prayed silently.

Banette poked its head out of his backpack and watched the world fall away below, its giggles swallowed by the rushing winds.

The hospital was never quiet, not even in the wee hours of the morning when most patients were doing their best to sleep off their injuries. Since Agatha's revelations, everyone had focused on healing and resting so they could finish cleaning up what was left of Team Rocket's and the Elite Four's mess once and for all, Gary included. But with thoughts of legends and myths and the idea that they weren't so far off from reality after all, Gary couldn't sleep. He hadn't been able to sleep much since he'd arrived on Cinnabar other than the short-lived coma he'd suffered, but even that didn't give him any respite. He was fighting in that fever sleep, seeing nightmares come to life in his vivid mind as perhaps only a mind like his could process. He saw the same visions now, too, as he dozed in his cot under a mountain of warm blankets.

First, it was the rampaging Snorlax that had wrecked half of Pallet Town, only this time they succeeded in bashing in his skull with their

meaty paws. Then he was facing the Ariados in Viridian Forest upside-down as they wrapped him in spider's silk and slowly drained the blood from his body with their poisoned fangs. Misty's Gyarados, flying over him and swallowing him whole in its gaping maw; the Ghosts of Lavender impaling him with shadow spears over and over and over; Sabrina stopping him dead in his tracks, cold eyes omniscient and indifferent as Ivy sawed of his still screaming head with a dull hunting knife; Alakazam ripping him apart from the inside-out with a ruthless Psychic attack, and falling alongside a mutilated Aerodactyl to his death hundreds of feet below; pulling the Chimera tech out of Marco's face only for Marco to smash it into his, those wriggling tentacles hungry as they burrowed through his eyes and ears and nose to get at his electrified brain.

And over again.

He suffered and died a thousand times in his dreams, and a thousand times over again. Agony that wasn't his.

"*It was yours,"* a voice assured him. *"But you passed it on to others so you could live in their stead."*

He died, and he watched it from afar alongside that disembodied voice that rang out above the Miracle Eye's whispers in his head. Even the ultimate Sight could not see the end of the torturous cycle.

I'm alive! he screamed. *I'm alive, and I'll wake up!*

"*Are you sure about that?"*

Will, inches from Gary's face as he dug a knife into his armor and whispered, "See you in hell."

I killed him, I killed him! He's in hell, not me!

"*You're certain about everything, aren't you?"*

The voice, neither male nor female, young nor old, not even in a language Gary could identify and yet intelligible all the same, spoke as though with his own thoughts, a memory he only now remembered as he re-lived the suffering and death he'd inflicted upon countless others just so he could live on.

Get out of my head! he screamed and fell to his knees, clutching his aching head. A room, stark white with no walls or floor, claustrophobic in its vast nothingness, seemed to shrink around him as

he floated. Walls that weren't there pressed against him, down on his shoulders and up against his knees, crushing the bone.

Get out of my head!

"*You first."*

Self-awareness yanked the floor out from under him, and Gary fell through the obliviating nothingness. He screamed and reached out, desperate for a handhold, anything to stop his descent to a place he feared he knew too well. Something cold and smooth caught on his palm, glass, and he crumpled to the floor on his knees. The metallic tile was cold through his pants, and he shivered. His palm, clammy with sweat, smeared against the glass surface that had broken his fall, and he looked up.

A bright light blinded him, and he could only make out the faint ripples of running water behind the glass for a moment. Whispers flooded his head as his vision doubled with Miracle Eye, too bright, and he hissed in pain.

Let me out! he screamed, fisting his free hand in his hair hard enough to yank it out.

Warmth bloomed upon the glass under his fingertips, and he squinted through the blinding light at the hand that traced his—three-fingered and skin grey with rot.

"*Let me out."*

Heat burned his hand and flames burst to life upon the glass. Gary yelped and yanked his hand back as the fire consumed the tank. A three-fingered shadow flickered among the flames until it, too, was consumed.

"*Delphi..."*

With a desperate gasp, Gary jerked in his bed and shrank in on himself. Espeon landed on his chest, forked tail slashing the air as its vacuous eyes stared deeply into his. It was dark, and it took him a moment to regain his bearings. A faint beeping on the EKG monitor next to him slowly lulled him back to reality, and Espeon's ringing concern washed over him like the floodgates to his mind had suddenly opened. Shaking, Gary stroked a hand over the violet feline's sleek fur and breathed.

A dream? he wondered.

Espeon flattened its ears over its back and bumped its nose against his chest.

"You didn't see it?" he whispered aloud.

Espeon saw all his dreams except this one, for the second night in a row since he'd woken from his coma.

Gary studied his original Psychic, the last memento of his grandfather, and made up his mind. Espeon leaped off the edge of the bed so Gary could get up, already sensing what he planned to do without requiring any explanation. The ring of concern had not abated, but he tamped it down and determinedly pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt Ivy had brought for him to change into in the morning. Quietly, he pulled out the various tubes and wires to which he'd been hooked up and laid them on the mussed cot. His head still ached, but there was no helping it except to get up and do what he should have done instead of falling into a coma in the first place.

Only Marco, Ash, and Agatha remained hospitalized at this point. The others had checked into rooms at the Pokémon Center to clear out space for others in need of medical attention. Gary moved as quietly as possible to avoid waking any of them and stole through the narrow aisles between cots toward the exit. A nurse making rounds headed straight for him with a clipboard and he froze, but Espeon trotted ahead of him. The jewel on its forehead glowed red, and the nurse stopped in her tracks. After a moment's hesitation, she turned around and went back the way she came without a word. Gary looked down at Espeon and grinned.

Thanks.

Espeon led the way out of the hospital in silence, and Gary followed. His body had healed and only his head continued to pain him, throbbing with every heartbeat as though his own blood pumping were poisoning him slowly. He rubbed his eyes, itchy, and wondered if he looked any better than when he'd woken up from the coma. Probably not.

Outside, the morning was cool while the sun remained hidden beyond the eastern horizon. Gary scratched the silken bandages wrapped around his forehead, irritated by their tightness and the feeling that they were all that kept his constant migraine from splitting his head in two. He rubbed his eyes hard as he trailed Espeon along the lava-

paved Cinnabar streets toward the volcano, thinking of a way to get past the guards that would inevitably be keeping watch outside the only entrance to the Gym.

All of a sudden, Espeon hissed menacingly as a small Thunderwave sparked at its feet and stayed its progress. Gary backed up into an alley off the main street, peering about for whoever had spotted him. He didn't have far to look.

"Lily?"

The blonde was leaning down from a second story fire escape with her Pikachu by her side. She waved down at him, arm no longer strung up in a sling but still bandaged. "Was wondering when you'd finally decide to go snooping."

She let Pikachu hop up onto her shoulder and climbed down the rusty ladder that bottomed out about eight feet above ground and jumped the rest of the way. Dusting herself off, she straightened and grinned up at Gary, though it didn't reach her eyes. Dressed as a civilian in modest yellow and brown, she looked even smaller and younger than her nineteen years.

"And they call me Clairvoyant," Gary grumbled before he could stop himself.

At this, she smiled for real and clasped her hands behind her back. "That's my apartment, in case you were probably wondering. Well, I mean, knowing you, you'd probably guessed that. It's not like I'd be lurking in random fire escapes or something...hah."

For the life of him, Gary could not hold his patience for this girl. She was smarter than him, smarter than anyone he knew, maybe even Oak, and kind in a way no one else was. After everything they'd been through, he supposed she'd become one of the few people he could call a friend, someone he could trust with his life implicitly. And yet, the spark of annoyance she kindled in him with her inane nicknaming, incoherent rambling, or just because she was right more often than he was had become so commonplace and anticipated that it was almost endearing. It was the kind of affectionate irritation he bore for Daisy. Lily was, in many respects, a lot like his sister. In a moment of irresponsible whim, he caught himself wondering if Oak had ever had the same idea.

"Gary?" Lily said. "You were gonna go sneak into the volcano and find the Pyromancer, right? I'm going with you. And that's totally *not* up

for debate, you know?"

"You waited for me?"

"Well, yeah. I figured it'd be important to you, too."

He started to shake his head, but a splitting pain cut him off. It was like something was stuck in his skull and hammering through the bone to get free. Lily reached for him, concerned.

"Maybe I shoulda just woken you up."

Gary sucked in a few breaths and tapped into his ironclad self-restraint to will the pain away. Espeon helped, but the dull ache didn't fade entirely. "I'm here now. Let's go. And...Lily?"

"Yeah?"

"...Thanks for waiting."

She nodded grimly. "I dunno what happened in the volcano that day, but I figured you'd wanna find out as much as me. I already let myself fall victim to one organization using science to advance its own ideals; I'm not gonna do it again."

Gary nodded and led her out of the alley. Together with Espeon and Pikachu, they made their way as quietly and as quickly as possible to the entrance to Mt. Cinnabar, where four armed guards stood watch with Growlithe and a mean-looking Magcargo that seemed to melt into the ground as it boiled.

"Oh no," Lily whispered. "How're we gonna get past them? Can we Teleport or something?"

"Alakazam's still at the Pokémon Center," Gary said, stroking Espeon's back as he crouched behind a burned down building just a couple blocks from the volcano's entrance. "But I've got an idea."

"Well, better make it count. I feel like we only have one shot at this."

Gary scratched Espeon behind the ear and narrowed his eyes. "I got it, trust me."

Like falling over the edge of something, Gary let his mind descend to a now familiar place, welcoming the flood as it submerged him under still waters. Espeon's fur needled on its back, and his eyes bled white with Miracle Eye. He didn't even have to think what he wanted,

Espeon already knew. Whispers danced in one ear and out the other and raced to the guardsmen and their Pokémon on watch, carried on invisible currents. They filled the guards' ears with enervating lullabies, lulling them into a soporific trance where they stood. Their shoulders drooped, their sword hands sagged, and their Pokémon's eyes drifted shut. The dream swept over them like a warm breeze, silent but effective.

Gary blinked, and he was himself again. Lily was staring at him openly.

"C'mon," he said before she could get any ideas to waste the time he'd bought them. "That won't last long."

Without waiting, he lurched to his feet and swallowed the dizzy spell that rushed him momentarily. Espeon darted ahead and blazed the trail, making it easy for him to follow. Soon, his feet carried him forward and his ever-reliable will tamped down the demonic agony in his head. Sweat collected at the collar of his shirt and forehead, but he wiped it away and jogged after the lithe feline. Lily's footsteps were close behind, and soon they had bypassed the passed out guards and were running through the tiled corridors of Mt. Cinnabar to the basement level they'd inadvertently infiltrated the last time they ended up in here.

"I saw you do that the last time we were here," Lily said. "Your eyes, they went all white."

"Miracle Eye," Gary said, figuring there was no point in hiding it. "I finally got the hang of it when I was fighting Will and Karen."

"You sure it's not the other way around?"

He didn't look back at Lily, but he could feel her eyes on his back as they descended.

Damn annoying genius.

"That's what I'm here to find out."

She said nothing more, and within minutes they had bypassed the section of stairway where Blaine's Ninetales had melted a thruway after the cave-in and proceeded to the secret computer room where they'd found Nimbus and Blaine during the eruption. The tall bonfire in the center of the room still burned, but Nimbus and Blaine were nowhere to be found. The only one here to greet them was the

Pyromancer.

The old crone didn't look up when they barged in. She sat on the floor, legs akimbo, and rocked gently before the flames. Her blindfold matted her fine, grey hair that pooled at the base of her spine on the tiled floor like spun silver. It shone in the firelight. The supercomputer that took up an entire wall of the room lay dark and dormant, but the fire offered light enough to see by. Gary marched right up to the old crone.

"You, step aside."

"The Pyromancer," Lily said. "That's what Dr. Nimbus called her."

"I don't care who she is. I'm getting to that secret lower level. Espeon."

Espeon stepped forward, but before it could get too close to the fire, the old crone jerked and sprawled on her hands and knees, teeth bared. Gary was so startled he stumbled backward, and Espeon hissed in warning. The old crone spat and hissed just as fiercely, animalistic, and dug her nails into the floor.

"What the fuck," Gary said.

Lily pushed past him with Pikachu and kneeled down. Pikachu sparked, ready to fight at a moment's notice.

"Get out of our way," she said.

The crone breathed in labored, shallow spurts and dribbled spittle from the sides of her mouth. With her blindfold in place, it was impossible to see where her eyes were looking, and yet she was fixated entirely upon Lily.

"Daughter of Dragons," she croaked. "You cannot win, not as you are."

"Win? Win what? Hey, just get out of the way, we have to get down there."

"The blood does not lie," the crone sang. "Quell the storm, ease the waters, but the blood remains. It always remains."

"Whatever," Gary said. "I'm getting in there. Espeon, do it now."

Espeon's forehead jewel glowed brilliant red, and the roaring fire writhed under the force of its Psychic energy. The flames parted, compelled, and revealed a hidden platform three feet across. Satisfied,

Gary walked past the flames and stepped onto the platform, but the crone grabbed his wrist in a crushing grip.

"The fire remains, too," she said.

"Let go of him!"

Lily pushed the Pyromancer, and she fell to the ground. Her greying hair caught the fire and singed, but she gathered the mass in her arms and shuddered. Gary held out a hand for Lily, and she joined him on the platform. The old crone, huddled on the floor, merely grinned at them.

"He waits," she crooned. "For Life, for Death, for the hell in between."

Pikachu squeaked angrily upon Lily's shoulder, but with Espeon's help, Gary got the platform moving and they descended, away from the crone's mad proselytizing. The fire licked at their limbs, but it didn't quite touch. Lily shivered next to him despite the heat, and down they went.

It only grew warmer. The secret room below was more of a hollow in the volcano's side than a room at all. The walls were black and smooth as glass, warm to the touch. Obsidian, molded by the lava that had gathered here and hollowed out a pocket in the stone eons ago. The air was thick, but a vent pumped in stale, cooler air from the higher floors above. There was a lingering odor of sulfur that tickled Gary's nose and stung his sore eyes.

Aside from the platform, there was a control panel embedded into the wall and hooked up to a large tank in the center of the sequestered cavern.

"Ugh, pretty sure the AC's still busted," Lily said.

Gary barely heard her as he walked toward the tank. Down here it was dark, the only light filtering from above and from the blinking lights in the control panel, not enough to see. Espeon mewled and didn't follow Gary as he approached the tank, frightened.

"What is that?" Lily said. "ChuChu, can we get some light?"

Gary stood before the dark tank. Its glass surface rippled—water filled it. He pressed his palm against the glass, cool to the touch despite the heat that radiated from the walls, just as Pikachu lit up like a light bulb. Light filled the room and illuminated the tank, and Gary recoiled

in horror.

Lily gasped. "Oh my god. What... What is that?"

A humanoid creature floated in the tank, tall as a man, but that was where the similarities ended. Its inflated head bobbed lightly in the rippling water and jiggled thick tubes attached to the breathing apparatus that covered the entire lower half of its face. Its skin appeared a sickly grey in the wan light, and Gary's eyes were drawn to its hand—three-fingered, like the one from his dream. It's other hand was missing. In fact, its entire left arm, shoulder, and a chunk of its chest and ribcage were missing. Tattered skin and muscle fluttered in the water, and twisted heads of deformed bone peeked out beneath them.

"I have a name."

Gary whirled. Lily was already backing up toward him when he spotted the old crone on the ground near the platform. Light from the blazing fire above shone down on her and brought out the silver in her hair, swathing the rest of her in shadow.

"Stay back," Gary warned. Espeon's hackles were raised and its small fangs were bared in warning at the crone.

She smiled and revealed only two teeth spaced apart on her mandible, the rest had rotted and fallen out long ago. "You came to see *me*, Delphi."

"Gary, what's she talking about? What's going on? What *is* that thing?" Lily said.

Understanding dawned, and Gary looked back at the mutant creature suspended in the tank behind him.

"That's right," the crone said. "I use this body to communicate."

"Gary," Lily hissed.

Gary reached for Scizor's Pokéball, but with a wave of her hand, the Pyromancer sent it flying. Pikachu began to spark in warning, but the Pyromancer tilted her head, and Pikachu lost its will to fight, whimpering.

"What the?"

Gary yanked Lily's arm so she was right next to him. "That thing's a Psychic. Stay behind me."

"I said, I have a *name*!" the crone bellowed.

Gary stumbled back with Lily, and she tripped and fell to one knee. Startled, she looked back over her shoulder at the creature in the tank and began to shake. Its eyes were open and faded entirely to white.

Gary put out a hand to the Pyromancer, a silent warning not to come any closer. "A name? Okay, what's your name? What do you want?"

"You know what I want, Delphi. It's why I summoned you here. I knew you would come, all of you."

She approached again, and Espeon hissed. The crone hissed right back, but Espeon didn't back down. All of a sudden, the firelight filtering down from above brightened to the point of blinding and for a brief second, everything went white. The crone screamed unintelligibly, and a wave of heat slammed into Gary and sent him tumbling on his rear where his back hit the base of the tank. A woman was wailing as the light and heat subsided, and Gary opened his eyes to the sight of Magmortar's wormy lips curled back over its teeth as it looked ready to devour the Pyromancer. It had her pinned to the ground, where Gary could see her wrinkled skin sunburning before his eyes. Her blindfold was burning at her shoulder, revealing a heavily scarred face where the skin had grown over her empty eye sockets.

"Get away from there!" Blaine shouted.

He hauled Lily up by her collar and all but threw her back from the tank, while Gary got to his feet as quickly as he could. The creature in the tank was no longer awake, its eyes having drifted shut as the Pyromancer writhed under Magmortar and the threat of incineration.

"Blaine!" Lily said. "What's going on?"

"What's going on is you two are getting out of here *now*."

"Call it off," Gary said. He snatched up Scizor's Pokéball and brandished it at Blaine. "Call off Magmortar, or I'll do it myself."

"Mr. Oak, think very carefully about what you think you're doing."

"Volt Tackle!" Lily shouted.

Pikachu tackled Magmortar out of nowhere and knocked it off the Pyromancer. Electric currents roamed over its body, paralyzing its limbs where it rolled to a stop just a few feet from the Pyromancer and spat angrily. Gary and Blaine stared in shock at the sudden and unexpected violence. Lily kneeled by the crone's side and laid a hand on her shoulder, but she flinched from the contact and mumbled incoherently.

"Now that that's settled," Lily said, "I wanna know what the hell's going on down here. What is *that*?"

She indicated the tank, gaze hard.

Blaine righted himself and recalled Magmortar to its Pokéball. His flinty eyes cast between Lily and Gary, and finally settled on the tank. "That is the pinnacle of my life's work, the entire reason I created Cinnabar and kept it safe, from the mainland and from ruin." He put a gloved hand on the glass and glared up at the creature. "I call it Mewtwo. Everyone else calls it the Pyromancer."

"So that's it," Gary said. "Your so-called Pyromancer's just a crazy old woman being brainwashed by a powerful Psychic. It wasn't you who stopped the eruption..."

Blaine didn't look at him and remained silent for a few moments. His hand pressed against the glass like he was trying to reach into it. Gary grabbed his other arm, and Blaine jerked. A flash of surprise passed through his eyes, like the moment one wakes from a deep slumber and adjusts to reality.

"Come on," Blaine said, heading back to the platform. "Best not to linger."

He hauled the old crone's body up under his shoulder and waited for Lily and Gary on the platform. They exchanged a look, but Lily followed with Pikachu nonetheless. Gary glanced back at the creature called Mewtwo one last time and winced as his migraine flared.

Blaine led Lily and Gary out of the room where the fire continued to blaze to a small clinic just down the hall. A young nurse was busy filling something out on a clipboard, but he dropped what he was doing and accepted the Pyromancer's body from Blaine and laid her on a stretcher. After a few hushed whispers, the nurse wheeled her away into a connecting room to recover, leaving Lily alone with Blaine and Gary once more.

Blaine opened one of the cabinets and retrieved a metal box that contained various jars of a paste-like, pearly substance. "I'll be firing the guards who were on duty this morning when you snuck in here."

Lily frowned. "There's no need for that."

Blaine removed his leather gloves and shrugged off the labcoat he'd been wearing. "Don't mistake me, Miss Kida. I did not underestimate you; I overestimated them."

Lily covered her mouth in horror at the sight of Blaine's bared left arm. The skin was warped and black and covered with oozing crags. The skin flaked, like crocodile skin left in the sun to bake and fester. During the eruption, she'd only glimpsed his bare hand; the damage was much worse than she'd imagined then.

With his good hand, Blaine dipped his fingers into one of the paste jars and slathered a dollop of the stuff over the back of his hand and arm. He shook as he applied the ointment, and sweat beaded upon his bald head, belying the agony he felt.

"What's happening to you?" Gary said, because Lily could not.

"I'm dying, Mr. Oak. Slowly and quite painfully."

He said it so casually that Lily almost thought she hadn't heard him right. "Dying? What do you mean? Is that... It looks like some kinda disease."

"Yes and no. It's more like a...side-effect. Can't get something for nothing."

"Mewtwo... You said it was your life's work."

Blaine slathered more paste onto his upper arm and shoulder and hissed through his nose. "I suppose it was inevitable that you'd find it. The true Pyromancer, that is."

"I've never heard of Mewtwo," Gary said. "A Psychic that powerful wouldn't go unnoticed, and it wouldn't have any reason to stay hidden like it is."

"You would be right, but that would presume Mewtwo is a complete, perfect creation capable of existing on its own. Never presume, Mr. Oak." He held out his diseased arm. "You won't like the consequences if you do."

"It's killing you, isn't it," Lily said softly.

Blaine regarded her. "It's killing both of us. This disease we share, it's the only thing keeping Mewtwo in line. That's how Mewtwo works, pure survival instinct. If something threatens it, it eliminates the threat. The eruption happened to be a convenient mutual goal, just as your coming here serves both our ends."

"Mewtwo led me here," Gary said. "It wanted me to find it."

"It didn't want you to come here, it simply predicted you would and used that knowledge to undermine me for its own ends. Or at least, it tried and failed. Aggh!" He caved in on himself and clutched his disfigured arm.

Lily reached for him, but he waved her off.

"You say it like Mewtwo can see the future," Gary said. "I was told there're some Clairvoyants who can do that, but not Pokémon."

"A Clairvoyant who repels death, a Reaper who embraces it, and a Medium who defies it. The Pyromancer—Mewtwo—predicted you would come here. It's not your average Psychic."

"Oh my god," Lily said. "You created it, didn't you? You created Mewtwo, and you're sick because of it. Because it was a failed experiment."

"What?" Gary said, aghast. "How could you possibly create something so powerful? You can't expect me to believe that."

"I could care less what you believe. *I* believe in science, and science can do extraordinary things." To Lily he said, "Wouldn't you agree, Miss Kida?"

"*Chimera is science, and science is the future. How else do you expect to get results if you don't run a few tests?"*

Lily shook her head as her mood darkened at the memory of Ariana's spiteful words. "I think science is only as good as the people wielding it. But this..." She looked meaningfully at Blaine's mutilated arm. "This is evil."

"Evil? Is protecting this island evil? You've been Cinnabarean for sixteen years and beneficiary of Mewtwo's protection, *my* protection. I remember the day you came here with your parents to seek asylum,

and I granted it in exchange for their part in maintaining Cinnabar's security, just as I expect from every citizen on this island. It was through the loyalty of people like your parents that I was able to synthesize the ancient Pokémon Mew's remains into what would ultimately become Mewtwo. Years of research and millions in funding to ensure this island's autonomy and safety. And you have the gall to call that evil?"

"*Gall*? You're keeping a living being locked up and in pain. You conducted morally objectionable experiments and put everybody on Cinnabar in danger because of it!" Lily was beside herself with outrage at the reality he'd forced her to swallow. Blaine, the savior of Cinnabar, the hero she, like all other children on the island, grew up to idolize and adore, was no better than Team Rocket's Chimera scientists in the end. "It doesn't matter what the ends are, if anything went wrong, it'd be the people who pay for it, like with the volcanic eruption, can't you see that? Never mind actually creating Mewtwo and turning it into a weapon of mass destruction."

"Like what you yourself have created?" Blaine interrupted her. "Omastar, Aerodactyl, even the Silver Wing, which will inevitably call forth Lugia from the bottom of the sea and become the ultimate weapon of mass destruction if Lance gets his way. Are they evil, too? Or is it just that your science is somehow holier than mine? Just because *you* say so." He regarded her with those flinty eyes so much like the ashes that Mt. Cinnabar had rained down on the island just days ago, dead and unforgiving. "Science is only as good as the people who wield it, yes. Do you condemn me for salvaging a failed experiment for the good of Cinnabar? Would you rather I have let this volcano destroy the whole island and kill countless innocent people?"

Tears welled in Lily's eyes. "That's not fair, that's not what I meant."

Blaine looked away and unrolled a bundle of silk bandages that sat on the counter. He began to bind his slathered arm from the shoulder. "It doesn't matter. The lives of the many will always be more important than the life of one. I'll pay any price to ensure it."

"Why?" Gary said. "Why would it kill you like this? You gave it life, so it doesn't make sense."

"Because Mewtwo isn't really alive. You saw it yourselves." He nodded to Gary. "It's incomplete. A failed experiment. Your Aerodactyl was revived from fossilized DNA. Mewtwo is...more of a synthetic imitation of the real thing. All it knows is survival. It infected me, and

I confined it to that tank where it couldn't infect anyone else. Now, it waits to die along with me."

"This is wrong," Lily said. "You should never have done this. I don't care if it was for Cinnabar, there's other ways to keep people safe and deter war."

"Not when I had Olivine and Fuchsia warships bombing each other with my island as their ground zero. Mewtwo isn't the monster here, Miss Kida. We are. What greater monster is there than man who fights wars fueled by pride and lust? You can denigrate me as much as you like, you wouldn't be the first. But in war, judgment is reserved for the victors, and it was *my* soldiers that won Kanto's war for them."

"The only way to stop a monster is to send a bigger one after it," Gary said.

"No, I *can't* accept that," Lily said. "There has to be another way. The war's over, and Team Rocket's on the run. The Elite Four're finished. All that's left is Lance and the Masked Man. With them gone, Kanto and Johto won't have any more reason to fight, not now and not ever again. You won't have a reason to hide out here anymore just waiting to die."

Blaine's stare bore a hole into her forehead, and not for the first time, she wondered if the man knew how to look any other way. "Daughter of Dragons... You're not the one Mewtwo saw coming."

She frowned, but before she could question him, Gary spoke up.

"That reminds me. When we got here, you said you were expecting a Clairvoyant, a Reaper, and a Medium. I'm right in thinking that's me, Ivy, and Ash. But I didn't know anything about Mewtwo until the other day."

"You're not listening, Mr. Oak. Mewtwo is a Psychic beyond even your comprehension. It sees things, and whether it chooses to reveal them is anyone's guess. Except to find ways to undermine me, it only acts to ensure its own survival. When you three showed up here demanding I start a war on Team Rocket, I knew it had foreseen something that would threaten Cinnabar."

"Yeah, Team Rocket and the Elite Four," Lily said. "Lance."

"Lugia," Gary said. "Mewtwo must know what Lance is doing. If he gets control of Lugia, we're all screwed, including Mewtwo so long as

it's stuck down there. Unless we get rid of Lugia."

"Gary, you really think you can get Articuno, Zapdos, and Moltres to fight with you guys? We don't even know where they are, and that's assuming they're actually real and alive."

Blaine had finished wrapping up his arm and pulled his coat back on. "The Triumvirate? Well, that explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Why Mewtwo led you to this very moment in time, to me." Blaine pulled on his gloves and headed for the door. "I know where to find the Triumvirate."

When Ash woke up that day, the last person he thought he would find hovering over him in his ass-bare hospital gown was Ivy.

"Get that bare ass outta bed," she snapped. "We both know there's nothing wrong with you that a buncha nurses can do anything about. Here."

She tossed him a bundle of clothes that he caught on instinct.

"Uh, mornin' to you to? What time is it?" Ash said as he stifled a yawn.

Butterfree, whom he'd kept out of its Pokéball for the past few days, rested at the head of his bed on the railing cleaning itself with its long, curling tongue. Pikachu stood on its hind legs at the foot of his bed, while Gengar was bothering a still-snoozing Agatha. Mismagius looked on as the Ghost ran its claws through Agatha's limp hair, seething in silence at its puerile cousin's antics.

"Time to give that bed to someone who actually needs it. No one likes a freeloader, Ash."

Ash stretched and slipped off the bed. Ivy had brought him a pair of jeans, a black T-shirt, and his favorite red jacket that had been stitched back together so many times one side was slightly shorter than the other. But it was freshly cleaned and pressed, and he smiled a little at her thoughtfulness.

"Aw Ivy, you know my freeloading ways're specially for you and Gary."

She made a show of rolling her eyes, but he caught the smirk she bit back. "C'mon, I'm starving."

Ash pulled on the jeans and shrugged out of his hospital gown. Butterfree alighted on his head and stretched its wings. Ash sneezed when some of the silvery powder that covered the Bug's wings got into his nose.

"Gary wasn't hungry?" he ventured.

"I haven't seen him all morning. Besides, the guy barely has a slice of toast and he's ready to go. You know how he is."

Ash chuckled. "Right, eats like a Delibird, shits like a Donphan."

"...Not that I would know, but ew."

"Hey, it's cool, I see how it is. I'm your sure-thing when he's not in the mood."

Ivy put a hand on her hip and grinned. "You're my sure-thing whenever scrambled eggs and bacon are involved. You ready or what?"

Ash pulled on his T-shirt, disturbing Butterfree and messing up his already messy hair. He ran a hand through it once and pulled on his ratty, red cap, good as new. "Don't hafta tell me twice."

Pikachu jumped down off the bed and ran around his feet, but Gengar frowned at the prospect of leaving the hospital and all the infirm people that fed its hunger for fear and distress. Ash frowned at the wave of annoyance the Ghost passed to him.

"Hey, suck it up, Gengar. You need some sun, anyway. I think you're getting pale," Ash said.

Gengar waved its hands around, distressed, and readily floated to Ash's side. Agatha's Mismagius hovered at the side of her bed, red eyes big and curious as it looked on at Gengar getting up and going.

"Ash?" Ivy said.

He regarded Mismagius thoughtfully. "Wanna come?"

Gengar immediately sent a sour wave of displeasure down his spine, and he cringed. But he held out a hand for Mismagius all the same.

"C'mon, there's room for two."

Mismagius smiled and dripped ghastly tar onto Agatha's cot that dissolved into thin air as it landed on the pristine sheets. The Ghost floated toward Ash and settled over his left shoulder, while Gengar occupied his right and frowned dramatically. Ivy watched the scene unfold with mild curiosity.

"I'm no Medium, but it looks to me like Gengar's jealous," she said.

Gengar glared down at Ivy and its irritation hit Ash like a sack of potatoes to the back, but he steadied himself and swallowed it, as he'd trained himself to do countless times in the past. He forced a smile.

"You know? I think you might be right." He glanced back at Gengar. "Don't worry, buddy. Mismagius's just taggin' along till Agatha's better, okay?"

The Ghosts regarded each other and roiled, and Ivy crossed her arms.

"You gonna be okay with two of those things? I know Agatha totes them around like the season's latest handbags, but she's also, like, mega old."

Ash laughed. "I'll be fine. And you're lucky she's asleep or she probably woulda smacked you for that one."

Ivy snorted. "I'd like to see her try. C'mon already, *eggs and bacon*, hello."

Butterfree took up a position on Agatha's chest and resumed cleaning itself, so Ash let it be for now and tailed Ivy out of the hospital. Outside, the sun was still low on the eastern horizon, but it was already hot and bright and people were out and about working on restoring the city and running errands. Ash squinted and shielded his eyes with a hand, while the two Ghosts he ferried about sank into his shoulders. Pikachu was happy to scamper in between Ivy and him, eager to stretch its legs.

"Hey, you haven't seen Lily lately, have you?"

Ivy pulled back her long hair into a ponytail to get it off her back in the heat. "We're staying at her apartment here in town, but she was gone when I woke up this morning."

"...Huh, so no sign of Lily or Gary. Think they eloped and didn't tell

us?"

That one made Ivy laugh. "I'd wish them a life full of dry toast breakfasts forever and ever."

Ash shared her laugh and they continued on for another block until they came across an open air stand with five stools at a bar and a matronly cook behind the counter attacking the griddle with a spatula in one hand and taking orders with a pen in the other.

"Oh my god, *what* is that smell?" Ash began to salivate as the smell of cooking eggs, pancakes, and coffee wafted to him from the stall.

"That's the smell of our scandalous breakfast affair without Gary and Lily," Ivy quipped.

"Dude, I'm so down. Look, those people're leaving, c'mon before someone else grabs the seats!"

Ash dragged her by the hand to two stools on the left-hand side of the stall in the shade of an awning, and together they settled in for what smelled like the best breakfast they would have in weeks. They placed their orders and sat back to enjoy enough food for four or five hungry people, having found a few precious moments of unadulterated bliss.

"Huh, it's only 10:30 in the morning, but it looks like people're clearing outta here pretty fast," Ivy said after swallowing a mouthful of pancake.

Ash glanced to his right and found the couple that had been sitting next to him hastily paying for their half-eaten breakfast and scuttling out of the stall as quickly as they could. Gengar cackled after them, while Mismagius followed them out beyond the awning, curious.

"Hah, yeah... Guess they weren't hungry?" Ash said.

Ivy smiled and gave him a knowing look, but she said nothing and took a drink of her coffee. Ash yawned lazily and swirled his orange juice, resting his chin on his hand.

"You know? I almost feel like it was all a dream, sitting here like this. Like it all happened to somebody else. Weird, right?"

Ivy wiped her mouth with a napkin and took her time chewing and swallowing. "No, I know what you mean. I've felt that way a lot on our journey together."

He studied her. "Are you happy, Ivy?"

"Happy?"

"Yeah, you know."

"Well, I'm happy this is almost over. And I'm really happy Giovanni's dead and Marco's okay." She paused before adding, "And I'm happy things're getting back to normal here on Cinnabar after, well, you know..."

She stared at her plate as she spoke, brow slightly furrowed, and Ash couldn't help but lean closer. "No, I mean, are you happy? Like, with us. With who we all are now. How things've turned out."

She looked up at him.

"I told you once it wouldn't be like this forever," he went on. "But that's what friends're for, you know? I guess what I mean is, was it worth it? Are you happy?"

She blinked a few times, and her blue eyes glistened a little. "We've been through hell, and maybe it's selfish, but I... I've never been happier than when I'm with you guys."

He smiled a genuine smile, and Mismagius, curious, peeked over his shoulder, drawn by the sudden influx of joy. "Me too. You know, you're the best thing that ever happened to me and Gary. 'Specially Gary, of course. But me, too."

"Guess you probably never woulda met Lily if you hadn't stuck around with me," Ivy teased.

"True. That's true." He ran his finger over the rim of his half-empty orange juice glass. "Can't imagine not knowin' her."

Ivy was silent for a long time, and when he finally looked back at her, she was watching him with the most endearing, dewey-eyed look he'd ever seen on her.

"Ivy?"

She swallowed. "Listen, Ash, take it from me. Whatever you do, make sure you actually do it. Don't wait around, 'cause we never know what's gonna happen next."

"Whoa, hey, what brought this on? I thought we were here gorging on

a super tasty breakfast while the nerds were away," he joked.

She didn't laugh. "Maybe you should think about the answer to your own question. Are you happy?"

Before Ash could think of something to say to that, someone called out to them.

"Hey, you two, I was looking for you."

Rosa and her Ferroseed made their way to the stall, and Gengar was immediately taken with the spiny pinecone of a Pokémon. The Ghost drifted to the ground to get a better look, and Ferroseed spun right through it, searching for physical contact. Surprised, Gengar poked its fingers through the gaping hole in its belly where Ferroseed had rolled through it and burst out laughing.

"Hey, Rosa," Ash said. "Uh, I'd offer you some food, but it looks like I ate it all."

Rosa side-eyed Gengar. "That's okay. I hope you're finished, because you better come with me."

"Something wrong?" Ivy said.

"No, but you better just come see for yourselves."

Ash was busy watching Gengar try to catch Ferroseed, who was still rolling through it, unsure why it couldn't hit the incorporeal Ghost.

"Hey, you still with us?" Ivy waved a hand in front of his face.

Ash smiled a little as Gengar tripped over itself trying to smother Ferroseed to no avail. Pikachu didn't even try to intervene, too busy nibbling on the last piece of Ash's toast, while Mismagius seemed to sigh with all the self-importance in the world.

"That little guy's really playful, huh?"

"Yeah, he's always been like that," Rosa said after a moment's hesitation.

He looked up. "Guess that's kinda hard to deal with if he's all thorny and sharp."

She shrugged. "It's fine."

Ash slipped out of his stool and held out an arm for Pikachu. "Well, I got it on good authority that Pokémon like having nicknames. Makes 'em feel special, you know?"

He took off his hat and tossed it on top of Ferroseed, laughing a little when the hat appeared to move by itself. Gengar found the trick wildly amusing and cackled.

"Right. And what would you suggest?" Rosa said.

Ferroseed's thorns poked fine holes through Ash's hat that enabled it to overturn the garment and right itself. Its yellow eyes spun around its segmented body, disoriented, until it landed on Rosa again and rolled to her side and made an eager grunting noise.

"Somethin' simple but fitting... I know, Thorny. What do you think?"

Rosa looked skeptical, but she bent down and picked up Ferroseed. Thick, leather gloves that reached her elbows shielded her from the Pokémon's spiny exterior. "I'll...take it under consideration."

Ivy cleared her throat. "So, what's going on?"

"Oh, right. C'mon, everyone's at the volcano."

Ash and Ivy paid for their meal and followed Rosa to the entrance to Mt. Cinnabar, where sure enough, everyone was gathered, including some new faces and one in particular that made Ash stop in his tracks. The young man took notice of him, too, above the din of conversation.

"Imago," Ash whispered.

Imago...

The Ghosts he hosted whispered the words in his ears over and over in dead languages and voices. The man he didn't know started toward him. He was carrying something in his arms, but it squirmed to life as he approached.

"Morty?" Lyra said, following him. "Oh..."

"Imago," Morty said. "So it really is true, there's two of us in one generation."

Mismagius materialized over Ash's shoulders and grinned down at Morty.

"Agatha's Mismagius... Why do you have it?"

"I, uh..." Ash stammered.

"Morty, this is the guy I told you about," Lyra said. "Ash Ketchum."

The creature Morty had been holding, a ratty old doll, stood on its own two feet and blinked up at Ash with haunted, red eyes. Not quite two feet tall, the creature emanated a familiar Aura despite its strange form.

What is that thing?

Ivy had left Ash's side and approached Marco, who was standing with the aid of a crutch.

"Hey, you're walking around," she said, relieved. "You'll be back to yourself in no time."

"Yeah, for the most part, I guess." He managed a smile.

"So, you must be the famous Ivy," the boy Marco had been talking to said. He was suited up in leather and his hair was windblown in a way that only made his boyish good looks more appealing. "I've heard a lot about you."

"This is Gym Leader Falkner," Marco said. "He... He helped me figure out a few things about being a Caelifer. It's all a little blurry."

Falkner glared at him. "If it is, then that's because you didn't listen to me. A Gyarados? Seriously? Not your typical Flyer."

Marco shifted his weight. "Then you've never seen one jump. Remind me to show you sometime."

"H-Hey there, Scare—I-I mean, Clair. *Clair*, hey. Hey, your hair looks great today! You dye it or...or something? It's, like, this deep blue-y blue, bluer than last time," Ethan said as he forced himself to smile.

"Shut up, Sparkplug," Clair snapped. "I'm not here to entertain your idiotic banter. You." She headed straight for Marco. "Where's the Clear Bell?"

"Clear Bell?" Marco said.

"Did I stutter?" She held out her gloved hand, expression severe. "Hand it over."

"Oh, so that's why you're all here," Lyra said.

"Uh, can someone tell me what's goin' on?" Ash said.

"Yeah, I can." Gary walked toward the group with Lily and Blaine in tow.

"Gary." Ivy went to his side, but he waved her off.

He clutched the side of his head like it hurt, but he otherwise gave nothing of his pain away. "We know where to find the Triumvirate."

"What? How?"

"Blaine. Turns out there's a lot we found out because of him."

Gary shot Blaine a meaningful look, but before anyone could press the matter, Blaine himself approached Clair.

"Miss Kida, what a pleasant surprise."

"Huh?" Lily said.

Clair eyed him coldly. "Blaine. The pleasure's all yours. I'm here on business..." She trailed off as her gaze alighted on Lily.

Ash looked between the two of them. "You're a Titan," he said to Clair. "But he called you..."

"Miss Kida," Blaine said, turning to Lily. "A shame that Clair is only here on business. Any other time and perhaps she may have liked to know her thin-blooded cousin turned out to be a Titan, after all."

"Cousin?" Ivy said.

Clair and Lily stared at each other, neither able to summon the words to speak.

"Yes. Miss Kida," Blaine addressed Lily. "I mentioned your parents came here sixteen years ago seeking asylum. You were a child then, and you probably do not remember. But they were running from the Taki Dynasty's current king, Clair's grandfather."

"I-I don't understand," Lily said. "I never knew any of this."

"Domadraghi," Clair said, still in shock. "You have the blood... This is impossible."

"*Improbable*," Blaine said, "but certainly not impossible."

"Forgive me, Gym Leader Blaine," Morty said. "I don't mean to interrupt, but time is not on our side. If we don't return to Ecruteak City with the Clear Bell soon, Pryce could cause irreversible damage."

Blaine scoffed. "Johto's problems are not my concern. Do what you will."

"So, where is it?" Falkner said.

Marco shook his head. "I don't have it."

"You...what?"

"No, it's not what you think. I gave it to Lyra. I knew I was too much of a liability with Giovanni, so I didn't want to take any chances."

"...The beasts entrusted it to you," Morty said. "And you gave it away?"

Lyra marched forward and got in Morty's face. "Watch it. You have no idea what Marco's been through since we rudely interrupted your praying." She fished around her pocket for something and shoved it in his face. "Here's your damned bell already."

The Clear Bell was no bigger than a child's fist and strung up on a red, silk ribbon. It would have passed for any ordinary bell except for the fact that it was carved of crystal so pure and white, it sparkled like a fine diamond. The tinkling sound it made had a cathartic effect that soothed Ash's tense nerves in the wake of meeting another Medium and the tension at hand, inexplicable. He was suddenly reminded of his mother, how she would sing to him at night, her voice out of tune and humble but comforting all the same. That feeling, the absolute security and love he felt as a child safe in his bed as she sang to him, came back as strong as the day he'd first felt it. It had been years since he'd felt so at peace, even for a few transient moments.

"I didn't give it away," Marco said. "Ethan and Lyra... Where they go, I go. Whatever you have to say to me, you can say to them, too."

Morty looked between the three friends, but he didn't accept the bell. "I see. The Phoenix has three shadows..." he mumbled to himself. "No, it's not mine to take. You keep it," he addressed Lyra. "Perhaps, try as we might, things always unfold as they were meant to in the end."

"That bell," Gary said. "What is it? I...I've never heard anything like it."

Morty spared him a glance, and his gaze fell to Espeon. He kept his expression carefully blank. "A question I have asked myself since the day I first heard its music years ago, Delphi."

"Okay, Ghost Buster," Ethan said. "Would it kill you to talk like a normal person for five minutes? Why're you guys all here?"

"To take you back to Johto," Falkner said. "There's a certain cretin in a mask who's been asking after you."

"The Masked Man," Ivy hissed. "Marco, you have a plan to kill him once and for all? I wanna help."

"Ivy," Gary said. "Listen, I know how close you are to this, but we need you here."

"What? Yeah, of course I'll help, but I gotta do this first. This is personal."

Gary and Lily exchanged a look. "No, I mean, we need you for this, and you can't go back to Johto. Not yet, at least."

"...What?"

"Ivy," Marco said, laying a hand on her shoulder. "You know better than anyone what Pryce has done to us, what he's capable of. We have to stop him."

"Yeah, that's why I wanna come with you—"

"You can't," he interrupted. "You have to stay here, with Gary and Ash. You still have something left to do, right?"

"But Marco, we promised—"

"We promised we'd get rid of Team Rocket. You have a shot to do that once and for all here in Kanto." He let his hand fall to hers and squeezed. "When we started this, we agreed that you'd come here to Kanto, while I stayed behind in Johto. You went after the head, I went after the roots. So let's finish this like we started it. The head and the roots. Lance and Pryce. They both have to be stopped. We can't let one go for the sake of the other."

Ivy blinked a few times, brow furrowed in hurt and confusion. "But... But we promised we'd end this together. The Masked Man, what he did to us..."

A hand on her shoulder from behind startled her.

"And we will," Ethan said softly. "We'll get that fucker for you. Me and Lyra and Marco. You've got my word as the resident sparkplug, I promise."

Lyra nodded. "We'll get him, Ivy. The three of us made a promise, too. Pryce isn't getting away with any of this, not while we're still breathing."

"I need you here, Ivy," Gary entreated her.

Ash smiled. "Yeah, what he said. I mean, what would we do without you?"

Ivy wrung her hands. "Well damn, guys, it's not like I can say no to that." She sniffled and wiped her nose. "Gary, I hope you have an idea of how the hell we're gonna stop Lance."

Clair looked on, ever silent, but Ash noted the way her red aura seized at the mention of Lance.

"You know me," Gary said. "I think too much. Of course I have an idea."

"Then I guess I'm in," Ivy said. She turned to Ash and held out her hand. "One last fight?"

"*There won't ever be a last battle for you."*

Misty's warning rang clear in his memory as he considered Ivy's offered hand.

Maybe not. But I'm still gonna win this one.

He took Ivy's hand and grinned. "I'm with you, a hundred percent."

Blaine turned back to Clair. "You're all welcome to rest here until you return to Johto. I expect your stay won't be long."

"It won't be," Clair bit out.

"...You can't fly with that crap on your face," Falkner said.

Marco touched the bandages around his left eye and ear. "I can see fine. I'm Caelifer."

"With one eye. Bird's eye view isn't the same with just one eye."

Ethan sighed. "Goddamnit, one of them was more than enough."

Lyra held the Clear Bell up to the sun. "Well, look on the bright side. I'll get to punch the crap outta more Rocket scum."

"...That's not even what I was talking about. Is that what you think about when you get that scary serious look?"

Ash ignored the banter and picked Lily out of the group. But she was on the other side of the group talking in hushed tones with Clair. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but from the look on her face, it wasn't sunshine and rainbows. He had half a mind to go over there, but Morty stepped in front of him and cut off his view.

"Ash, right?" he said.

He had a Misdreavus floating over his head that watched Mismagius with unabashed awe, though the latter seemed bored just having to be here right now. Gengar had assumed its physical form and was taken with Banette, but the ragdoll Pokémon clutched Morty's pant leg and glowered at Gengar with its lurid eyes, somehow off-putting in their solidity. The thing didn't *feel* like a Ghost.

"You're wondering about Banette," Morty said.

Ash blinked up at the taller man. "How'd you know?"

"It's not your typical Ghost. I'm not surprised you're curious." He paused before adding, "Forgive me, most people are afraid of Banette. I'm so used to their looks. I guess...it's somehow refreshing to know you're just curious."

Ash stole a last glance at Lily, but she was still deep in conversation with Clair and didn't take notice of him. Resigned, he turned his attention back to Morty and resolved to catch up with her later.

"Hey, Agatha had a rough time when we fought Lorelei. I bet she'd be happy to see you if you want."

Morty brightened a little. "She's well? It's been a few years since we last spoke in person. I would like to see her, if it's not too much of an inconvenience."

Ash nodded. "It's fine. She'll find some excuse to get all grumpy, but

that's how she is, you know?"

"Yes, I know very well."

The way Morty said it with the hint of a smile made Ash think he indeed knew very well. Somehow, the thought was a small comfort. After everything Agatha had been through, it was nice to know someone else understood.

"C'mon, I'll take you to her. She's still at the hospital."

The Johto trio and their Gym Leader escorts had all agreed to spend one last night in Cinnabar for Marco's sake before making the long journey back to Ecruteak City. Ivy and Lily headed back to her apartment for the night while Ash and Gary rented a room at the Pokémon Center. Gary had filled the others in on what had happened with Blaine and Mewtwo, much to Ash's horror.

"I can't believe I'm sayin' this," Ash said as they settled into bed for the night, "but after all the crap we've seen, I'm kinda not surprised Blaine went and created his own Frankenstein. Guess it explains how Cinnabar always made it out okay during the Great War."

Gary snorted. "On that note, I'd have to agree with you. Lily was really upset about the whole thing and she wasn't afraid to tell Blaine as much."

"Is she okay? I didn't get to talk to her much today with that Dragon lady around."

Gary folded his arms behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. Espeon curled up next to his chest and purred softly. "Clair. She's Lance's cousin, you know."

"Che, figures. Everything comes back to that asshole."

"But if Lily's related to Clair, then that means she's related to Lance, too."

Ash made a face, and Pikachu looked up at him from its place curled up on his chest. "Lily's nothin' like Lance. Ivy said it, too, and she's actually met the guy, so we know it's true."

"I didn't mean it that way." Gary fell silent for a few moments, and for a while Ash thought he'd leave it at that. "There's a lot we don't

understand about Titans. Agatha said they weren't really Tamers."

"Whatever, none of that matters. I know Lily, and she's one of us. I don't give a shit what her last name is or about Clair or Lance or any of 'em. I just care about her."

Gary chuckled. "I thought you'd never admit it."

Ash sat up in bed and disturbed Pikachu. "What're you talkin' about?"

Gary sat up and leaned on his elbows so they were at eye level across the small room. "You know what I'm talking about. You and Lily."

Ash fell back down on the bed and sighed. "Whatever."

"Who are you and what've you done with Ash?"

Ash groaned. "Dude, we got a legendary Pokémon to put down. I feel like the last thing I should be worried about is girls."

Gary sat up in bed. "...Now I'm really worried. Are you sure the nurses cleared you to check outta the hospital?"

Ash threw his pillow at Gary across the room, but he caught it before it could smack him in the face. "Hey, toss that back."

"Why? Now I have two. Thanks."

Ash rolled over and grimaced, but at the sight of Gary smiling to himself, he thought better of ruining the moment.

"Anyway, I'm pretty sure I blew it with Lily, so it doesn't matter anymore."

"I seriously doubt that."

"No, really. Back on the Seafoam Islands, she tried to kiss me and I totally freaked. God I'm such a pussy."

"Yeah, you are."

Ash draped his arms over his eyes. "You're s'posed to say, 'No, Ash, you're incredible and awesome and it's all gonna be okay.'"

"I'd be lying."

"Oh, fuck you."

Something soft hit him in the side of his head and startled him. Gary had thrown his pillow back.

"Stop moping, Ash. You always did like to sulk like a baby, and my sister's not here to coddle you."

Ash hugged the pillow to his chest much to Pikachu's dismay. "I'm not moping."

"Oh, no? Then here's a thought: try fixing things with Lily."

"It's not that easy, man. We're in the middle of a war, and now all this crap with Lance? I'm the last thing she wants to worry about."

"Maybe that's up to her, ever think about that? Besides, she's not Misty. She's not gonna let you get away with your usual bullshit."

Ash sat up in bed again, disturbing Pikachu for a third time. The yellow rodent chittered angrily and stalked off to the foot of the bed to curl up by itself.

"Misty's got nothin' to do with it," Ash snapped.

"She's your excuse. She's got everything to do with it."

"I'm not making excuses!"

"Please, Ash, I'm a lotta things, but I'm not an idiot. I might've been dealing with my own crap back in Saffron, but I saw what was going on with you and Misty. You're afraid Lily'll turn around and give you some impossible ultimatum like Misty did, or she'll find some other reason to turn you down just 'cause it didn't work out with Misty. Well, *Lily's not Misty*."

"Of course she's not!"

Gengar began to stir from its nap where it rested dormant within Ash as his anger mounted. Gary had no sympathy for him as he glared in that annoyingly superior way he had.

"But I don't have time for this right now, none of us do. The last thing Lily wants right now is to—"

"Just shut up already about what Lily wants. You don't *know* what she wants unless you ask her. So stop making excuses for yourself by using what happened with Misty as a proxy for what hasn't even started yet with Lily. And quit the doomsday bullshit." Gary averted his gaze. "If

anything, the fact that this might all blow up in our faces should be reason enough to take advantage of the time we have left with people who matter."

Ash wanted to be angry with Gary, but the heat left him so quickly he wondered if it had been there at all. Gary was staring at the wall with his arms around his knees and Espeon looking up at him curiously.

"We're not talkin' about Lily anymore, are we?" Ash said.

Gary said nothing, and Ash shifted in his bed so he was sitting up and facing Gary across the room.

"I found out from Agatha," he went on. "Didn't believe it at first, but then I saw how hard it was for her just to say it out loud."

Gary still said nothing.

"I dunno if it's okay for me to say this now, but he was like a grandpa to me, too. I guess knowin' what I know now about what we are, that means even more." A knot began to form in his throat, but he swallowed it with a smile. "'Member when he used to take us fishing? He had that ratty old vest, the one with the pins and buckles and the broken flies he superglued back together. Remember? And he'd always stick a new one on every time we came back, and we'd fight over whether it'd be your fly or mine."

Gary rubbed his eyes, but his bangs hid his face from view. "He always found a clean patch of that damned vest to pin on more junk."

"Oh man, and remember that one time he bagged that huge Magikarp? That thing was like eight feet long! And it pulled him in the water and you dove in all, 'Gramps, I'll save you!' or somethin'. And then you just ended up gettin' tangled in the fishing line and Venusaur had to haul you out."

"The way I remember it, you're the one who said you'd save him and pushed me in after him."

Ash frowned. "Huh, I don't remember it like that."

They fell into silence, and Gary rubbed his eyes again.

"I thought he'd always be here," Gary said finally. "I never thought..."

Ash had never seen Gary like this before in all their years of knowing

each other. His mother and grandmother had died when he was too young to remember, and his father had never been in the picture. It was always Oak that had been there, for both of them, and even now it was hard to imagine a world where the old man no longer existed.

"Ash," Gary said, looking up. His green eyes, so much like Oak's, were misted with unshed tears. "What do I do now?"

Gary was always solid, always sure of himself and what he had to do even when Ash was not. The stubborn pit in Ash's stomach told him Gary was right about Lily, too, though pride wouldn't let him admit it. But the Gary who was asking him the question Ash had been asking every time the road became bumpy and the journey impossibly long was not the Gary he'd always known. He was alone now, cast out with no one to fall back on and ask, 'Am I doing the right thing?' For the first time since Agatha had warned him about his inborn longevity, Ash wondered if this was what people feared about getting older, the stifling silence that lingered in the place of self-doubt and vulnerability. To grow old was to learn to be lonely. To outlive even his childhood friends and family, as Ash was destined to do, had never been so real a threat as it was now.

And inevitably, as time and experience had proven to him over and over again, Gary was right. If time had any use at all, it was to spend it with the people who mattered most while they still could. And as for Gary...

"I dunno," Ash said. "But I know you'll figure it out. You always do."

Gary scowled. "Right, 'cause I'm Samuel Oak's grandson."

Ash looked at him funny. "Nah, 'cause you're just Gary, my best friend. And I believe in you."

Gary stared at him, speechless, but he blinked his tears away before they could fall and rubbed his nose. His usual sneer was back in place, and Ash was almost relieved to see it.

"I'm your only friend, dumbass."

Ash laughed a little. "Wanna hug it out?"

"Shut up."

Ash laughed again, and Gary relaxed. "Actually, we made a lotta new friends this past year, huh? Even if stuff's been goin' to shit, at least

something good came out of it."

Espeon kneaded a patch on Gary's pants and curled up in his lap, purring. He drew a hand down its back absentmindedly. "I just want this all to end so we have a chance to enjoy the good stuff."

They both lay back on their beds, this time for good, and Ash thought about Gary's words.

"*I just want this all to end.*"

His hand found some of the old burns on his underarms from the aberrant Rhydon's Flamethrower back in Mt. Moon and traced the rippled, shiny flesh absently. He thought about Surge and wondered if the man was still in a wheelchair, if he'd made it back to Vermilion to run the Gym again. He thought about his mom back in Pewter still in a coma, perhaps never to wake again. He thought about Misty, who would be back in Cerulean now running her Gym with only Violet to help, safe from the chaos and destruction Ash chased after.

"*I just want you to* want *to stay.*"

But he couldn't stay, and lying in the dark tracing old scars and remembering the phantom pain of death that couldn't reach him, he realized he'd never wanted to. There would always be something pulling him away, something with an attraction far stronger than the peace and tranquility Cerulean offered. Misty hadn't been enough, and he wasn't ready for all this to end.

He thought about Lily that day on the beach at the Seafoam Islands.

"*You don't know what I want.*"

Gengar whispered in his ear, soft susurrations, half asleep but ever present. They made no sense, and thinking had never been Ash's strongest quality. He let the gentle gibberish lull him to sleep, imagining stories and voices he would never know, lives he would never lead, and dreamed of home.

Based on a few reviews and PMs I've gotten on the subject, what would people think about a side story collection about the Johto trio's journey? It wouldn't impact the sequel, that is still happening either way. Please let me know your thoughts!

27. Shamouti Island, Part 1

Triumvirate, chapter 27: Shamouti Island, Part 1
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

For the first time since the Battle of Cinnabar ended, Lily could not sleep. Lately, it had been Ivy who stood among the fluttering, white curtains overlooking the balcony of the small apartment, and Lily would wake to the sight of her just standing there, thinking. Remembering, maybe. Mourning, most likely. She never said a word, just smiled a little when she found Lily rubbing her eyes. Keeping secrets.

"*Can you keep a secret?*"

Back then, alone in a luxury cabin on the S.S. Aqua with a girl—a stranger—whose life she'd saved at the cost of something precious she would never, ever get back, Lily had no idea what she was getting into when she'd said yes, she could keep a secret. She was a scientist working on highly confidential biological experiments in a high security lab. Of course she could keep a secret.

When Clair had asked her the same question, this time she didn't have a choice in the matter.

Ivy's breathing was even and soft, exhaustion finally having caught up to her at 3:57 in the morning on the last day. Last day of what? Lily asked herself that question as she stepped out onto her small balcony next to the portable barbecue and leaned on the steel railing. The lava-chiseled road, still under construction after Mt. Cinnabar's eruption, glistened like a black ocean under the waxing gibbous moon above. It was a clear night, a billion stars in the sky and not a cloud on the horizon. A gentle sea breeze blew in from the south, warm and balmy, but it drew light goose bumps upon her bare arms. An oversized T-shirt with the emblem for Cinnabar Labs was emblazoned in red on a grey background over her chest, and she wiggled her bare toes on the wooden floor. Cinnabar was sleeping, its citizens worn out from the constant rebuilding efforts over the last few days since the end of the hostilities, and few lights remained on. Only the stars and moon above twinkled against the dark sea above and below, stretching forever.

Lily took a deep breath and tasted the salt and smoke that was the smell of home here on the island. Boats—seventy-foot yachts and

paint-peeling trawlers and everything in between—sloshed in the harbors to the south and east on the dark sea that went on forever.

Home, she thought.

There was something about Clair, something so repugnant that it was at the same time alluring in its strangeness, the familiarity of her revile so off-putting there was no getting it out of her head. The duality still made Lily reel, like the moth to the flame that would incinerate it on contact but that she could not help but fly toward as her only beacon in the vast, black ocean surrounding her now.

Maybe it was their blood relation, she told herself. But then, all Titans are blood related if the stories are to be believed.

'Domadraghi', Clair had called her.

Dragon Tamer.

They say siblings separated at birth can always recognize each other years and years later. It's in the blood. In Lily's case, the blood was all there was. It connected her to Clair, a distant cousin far above her in rank and birth and rights. It also connected her to Lance, the heir to the Taki Dynasty himself.

And that was another thing, Lily had wondered. Didn't Clair care that Lance, her own cousin, was responsible for so much mayhem and death? That he had besmirched the Taki Dynasty's name for his own selfish ambitions?

"*He's an Elite Four and one of you—one of us,"* Lily corrected herself. She remembered stealing a glance at Ash then, for reassurance or maybe just because he was hard to miss. Clair's icy gaze never left her, though. *"And that means he can be beaten. My friends beat the others. He's only human."*

Clair leaned in close. Maybe she noticed Lily's wandering eyes. Maybe she noticed more than that. *"I'll tell you the first secret all Titans ever learn."*

Even now, hours after the meeting that had changed her life forever, Lily was not sure how to swallow Clair's words. Steven had warned her that Titans were notoriously duplicitous, in his words, but she had assumed he must mean others. Those that grew up around their own kind. Funny how the assumptions always come back to bite you in the ass. As a scientist, Lily had no room for doubt, for doubt could mean

the difference between a once-in-a-lifetime breakthrough and mediocrity or worse, regression. Never before had that tradeoff been so clear in her mind, so palpable her fingers trembled on the cool, steel railing just thinking about it.

So close to Clair and out of earshot of the others as they reunited with their Johto counterparts, Lily could not help but notice the slight chill about the older woman. Her skin, flawless, was so smooth and taut it shone like polished ivory, statuesque. Too-white teeth peeked out from behind painted lips, sharp, or maybe it was a trick of the light. Lily ran her tongue over her own teeth gingerly, looking to get cut.

"*We're not human; we're Dragonsblood."*

And how was that supposed to help her? Lily had asked as much.

"*That depends on you. If you walk away now, you can live."*

The memory sloshed against the highest walls of her mind and plunged over them, pulling her deeper into the dark ocean that sprawled at her feet below. Lily lifted her gaze to the expanse of night above, the endless stars that persevered through the darkness, small as they were. They offered no solace or console now.

"*I'm not gonna walk away,"* she'd promised Clair. *"And neither should you."*

"*Then you'll die. You can't kill a Dragon as old as Lance."*

But Lance of the Elite Four was a young man, no more than thirty years old, give or take a few years. In his prime, sure, but mortal for a certainty.

"*Not the blood in his veins,"* Clair had confided. *"It's the Old Blood, from the wellspring of Time and Space. And you?"* Clair didn't even bother giving her a once-over. *"You're as diluted as a vodka soda. His control... It's a power like nothing our clan has ever seen. Not since the Originals. Human?"* Clair scoffed, her perfectly painted lips stretching into a smile like cellophane drawn taut over raw meat. *"Don't be cute. I wouldn't believe it even if I saw it."*

Lily squeezed the handrailing on her balcony to hold onto something, anything at all. The dark ocean at her feet seemed to rise to meet her and lap at her bare toes, cold.

She didn't know why she said it, but lately she didn't know why she

said or thought a lot of things. Ever since she met Ash and the others, she'd seen a real Ghost, survived not one but two falls to her death, escaped and helped dismantle an international crime syndicate, and even befriended a Champion. If she could win over one, maybe she could do it again.

"*Yeah, well, I like showing people things they've never seen before. You'll see.*"

But Clair was unconvinced, and just inches apart, Lily didn't miss the flash of pity in her beautiful, cerulean eyes, like morning mist in their mystery and reach, as though there was no hiding from her.

Lily couldn't know it then, but she was only the second person to promise Clair a sight she'd never seen before. Young women full of hopes and dreams are a dime a dozen, but the few who wait and plan and *act* just might surprise you. One day, just you wait, you'll see.

You'll see.

But all Lily saw now was the black ocean swelling on all sides, slashed in moonlight and starlight too far away to offer any heat, steadily rising to claim her as it claimed so many before her. She was not Ivy; she could not thrive in the dark. A nomad wandering over silent waters searching for a beacon to burn her, plunged into darkness everlasting, even the steel railing separating her from the edge seemed flimsy in her trembling grip. Suddenly, any minute now, the water would wash over her toes and climb up her bare legs to her waist, her chest, gush into her mouth and nose with searching, hungry fingers that would tear at her throat and stomach. Maybe it would rip open her veins and spill the Dragonsblood that coursed through them, too diluted to hold Clair's attention for long. No one would miss the stray that slipped through the cracks, the one that got lucky until her little luck ran out.

They laughed at her, and though the dark water muffled the sound, she knew it was Ariana cackling, vengeance for Archer's death sated at the knowledge that Lily would drown here like an abandoned dog. Steven, disappointed but somehow not surprised. *Titans are notoriously duplicitous, you know.* Clair, tutting and sighing like she'd predicted this all along. You can't swim unless someone teaches you how.

Lance, faceless and omnipresent, his cold hand around her ankle pulling her down deeper into the abyss as water rushed past her ears and stung her eyes, his fingernails as long and sharp as nails, digging

into her bare flesh and spilling more of that precious blood that made him great and her nothing but bait on a lure.

What did you expect? *What did you expect?*

She clutched a hand over her clenching throat, holding back the gag reflex. *Don't let the water in, don't let it in, don't let it—*

"Hey, what're you doing up?"

A hand on Lily's shoulder made her jump and she whipped around with her hands flinging, but Ivy caught her wrists like she'd seen them coming a mile away. Her grip was firm, just slightly painful but not intolerable, and despite Lily's involuntary shaking, she didn't slip free. Blue eyes frowned down at her, a mixture of confusion and concern, yet no sign of sleepiness. In that moment, as Lily registered her own labored breathing (breathing, not drowning), the sticky sheen of sweat on her face and under her arms and at the backs of her thighs, the grooves and cricks in the wood under feet, hypersensitive, she had never envied Ivy more her composure and boundless self-control.

"Damn, you look like you swallowed a Lava Cookie whole," Ivy said. "You're not coming down with a fever, are you?"

It took a moment to remember how to move her hands, but Lily pulled out of Ivy's grip and steadied herself on the railing a couple feet away, still breathing hard. She wiped her brow with the baggy sleeve of her shirt, her loose, long hair hot against the back of her neck. Ivy watched her but didn't attempt to restrain her again.

"Lily? Is everything okay? It's super late."

"Sorry, yeah, I'm fine."

She pulled her hair over her left shoulder to get it off her neck, but it didn't help with the rush of heat that had overcome her after the cold wave of dread recalling the conversation with Clair.

Ivy seemed to notice her distress, but she didn't approach. "You know, I hate when people ask if I'm okay. It's always like they expect something's gotta be wrong. Otherwise, they wouldn't ask."

Ariana cackled somewhere in the dark recesses of Lily's mind, drowned in the black ocean that still eddied on all sides despite Ivy's presence.

"I'm fine, really. Sorry if I woke you."

"No offense, but you're the worst liar I've ever met."

Lily did her best to glare at Ivy, but the girl was a wall of pitch so imposing even the dark ocean had nothing on her. Had she really never noticed it before now? Even back when she'd watched Ivy toss those Rocket corpses over the side of the S.S. Aqua? Like taking out the trash, just another chore that had to get done, and she might as well do it herself. In that singular moment, facing off against Ivy's scrutiny, Lily had a fleeting glimpse of the fear and uncertainty Gary had confessed to her as they flew to the Seafoam Islands. The abyss gazed back into her, and on the edge of it, she finally took notice.

"Funny," she said, forcing herself to breathe more deeply and evenly with some effort. "All I keep hearing is how Titans're all two-faced snobs."

Ivy didn't seem to find it funny. "Speaking of snobs, Clair sure was in a hurry not to talk to anyone but you."

Lily held her ground, but under Ivy's scrutiny it was a losing battle on her part to avoid attention.

"What'd she say to you?"

"Nothing," Lily countered. "It's nothing."

"Bullshit. I've never seen you so spooked, not since the S.S. Aqua."

They faced off in tense silence for a moment, and Ivy wasn't backing down.

"You've been really off all day," she went on. Her eyes narrowed as a thought came to her. "Is it Clair? What'd she say to you?"

Lily bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to hurt. "It's nothing, just forget it."

She tried to push past Ivy and get back inside, maybe try to sleep for a few hours before they were scheduled to leave Cinnabar, but Ivy stepped in front of her.

"It's not nothing, obviously. C'mon, you can tell me."

Lily tried once more to get past Ivy, but once more Ivy blocked her path. The white curtains fluttered around them, disturbed in the

breeze.

"I don't want to talk about it," Lily said. "Just let me get some sleep."

"Not before you tell me what's going on. Whatever secret Clair told you to make you so upset isn't worth it. Talk to me, c'mon."

Something, maybe the gag reflex she'd swallowed or the phantom claw dragging her down by the ankle to the bottom of a black sea snapped something inside Lily in that moment. She blinked, and it was the face of the first Rocket Agent she'd killed, eyeballs bursting in his skull, fried to smithereens, that stared back at her.

"It's not your secret to know!" she snapped. "Just get outta my way already!"

Ivy was so taken aback that she didn't even try to stop Lily as the shorter girl stormed past her back to the bedroom, where the two of them shared the double bed. Pikachu and Wigglytuff had been snoozing at the foot of it and both jolted awake at Lily's raised voice, ears twitching in alarm as they scanned the area for any sign of danger. Wigglytuff's sleepy, dreamlike eyes focused on Lily as she stormed back into the apartment and roughly tore back the covers to climb into bed. Ivy remained standing at the balcony's doorway, expression unreadable after the initial shock.

Lily pulled the covers over her body and curled up on her side as far away from the middle of the bed as possible, anger still pulsing like a heatwave through her frame.

You don't know. You don't know.

"Maybe not," Ivy said finally, softly, like the brush of velvet against the skin. "But I know that those kinds of secrets're the worst to hold onto alone."

You don't know.

The mantra repeated in Lily's head until she didn't recognize the voice anymore. What did any of them know? What did *she* know, really? The death and destruction they had been working so hard to avert all came back to one man, a man just like her. She couldn't possibly walk away. It had to be her, somewhere at the pit of that black ocean was the truth she'd known perhaps since the day she'd discovered what she was, perhaps long before. Like Mewtwo in its own private dark ocean, she too floated to forgotten depths, alone. Save for him.

"*He waits!*" the Pyromancer had shrieked in her madness.

He's waiting for me, not you.

Pikachu pawed at her bent knees to curl up and get comfortable, and Ivy silently crept back into bed, her back to Lily far on the other side. The space between their backs was cold and drafty.

"Just remember, you're one of us. You're not alone."

Ivy's voice was so soft and muffled, Lily almost didn't hear her. But instead of finding comfort in that whispered promise, she pulled the covers tighter around her face and squeezed her eyes shut to keep the tears at bay. With fear, it was best to let the waves wash over her and let them pass instead of struggling and risk getting sucked in deeper. But in this case, it made little difference. In her fear, in Lance's secret, in the bed next to Ivy with a cold draft in between them, she was alone.

As with every important event in his life, Ash rose early that morning before his departure from Cinnabar to face perhaps the greatest trial of his young life. Gary's bed was already neatly made and his bag packed, a sight that dampened Ash's spirits just a little.

"Always second best," he said wistfully.

Gengar materialized on the ground in front of him and peered up at him, curious. Pikachu stretched languidly on the bed and yawned with a little squeak. It blinked its dark, beady eyes up at Ash and swished its tail. Hefting itself up onto its four legs, it leaped from the bed and onto Ash's shoulder, nipping at his uncombed hair. Ash scratched it behind the ear, gaze softening as he smiled to himself.

"It's okay. Just means I got the motivation to get better, you know?"

Gengar didn't really know what the red human was babbling on about now, but his smile usually promised a good time—usually the opportunity to watch Ash stuff his face with food and balloon out like his whole head was swollen, about to pop, and maybe one day it would, and wouldn't *that* be a sight—so the Ghost was eager to participate in whatever was happening next. Maybe they'd even get to kill a few people today, or better yet, watch them bleed out and scream and shudder.

Ash winced and shot Gengar a look as the thoughts passed from Ghost

to Tamer.

"Slow your roll, buddy. You'll see your fill today," Ash grumbled.

He quickly dressed, grabbed a granola bar from Gary's pack, and headed for the hospital. Gengar almost couldn't contain its excitement as they entered through the front doors and immediately the dank, stagnant atmosphere of death and debilitation filled the air. Ash shot the Ghost a look that said, 'Keep it together or else', but even this didn't dampen Gengar's mood. Pikachu clung to Ash's shoulder, eyes wide and observant as they made their way through the beds and past patients in various states of decay. Gengar stuck its tongue out at the sniveling rodent and cackled when Pikachu sparked in warning.

Ash soon found who he'd come to see.

"I was just talking about you," Agatha said as Morty prepared a cup of piping hot tea for her in her cot.

"All good things, I hope?" he said with a grin.

"She was telling me about how you acted like a lunatic in Lavender when she was trying to save Mr. Fuji from malicious possession," Morty said amiably.

Ash slumped, and Gengar slumped with him. "Aw, I wasn't that bad, was I?"

"Worse," Agatha snapped.

Banette shuffled on the floor behind Morty's legs, poking its head out shyly to stare at the taller Gengar, but Gengar ignored it completely in favor of jumping up onto Agatha's bed and disturbing Butterfree, who until then had been perched on her knee.

"You stop that right now," Agatha hissed at Gengar as the spooked Butterfree fluttered to her head to perch. "Ash, you've been at this for what, a couple months now?"

"Actually, it's been over a year—"

"And you still don't have Gengar under control."

"Aw, c'mon, Agatha, it's not like that. Gengar just likes to mess around."

Morty poured the tea, and Banette was forced to stand on its own. It's

too-long sleeves made a scraping noise, like hidden nails raked against the tattered cloth inside, and its red eyes narrowed at Ash, then at Morty.

"Even so, a fully-realized Medium ought to know how to rein in his Ghosts when necessary," Agatha prattled on.

Ash pulled off his hat and clutched it to his chest. "Well, when you put it like that... I guess I still have a lot to learn, huh?"

Agatha's gaze was as cold and mean as ever, which was why her next words took him completely by surprise. "That's right. And I can think of no better partner to whip you into the next level than Mismagius."

The hooded Ghost appeared over Agatha's shoulders and opened its mouth in a sinister smile. Tar dripped over its shadowy lips and disintegrated as it plopped onto Agatha's shoulders, but Ash was too surprised to return the ghastly grin.

"Wait, what? You mean, you're giving me Mismagius?" he sputtered. "But it's your oldest Pokémon. And I thought Ghosts were bound or, like, tethered or something?"

"Not necessarily," Morty said, holding out a hand for Banette. The sentient ragdoll dug its hidden claws into his sleeve and clambered up to his shoulder, ripping into the boiled leather jerkin he wore as it lifted its weight.

"So long as Mismagius has a Medium to host it, it can survive on our plane," Agatha explained. "And no, I'm not *giving* it to you. It was Mismagius's idea."

Jaw agape, Ash stared up at the spectre and Mismagius grinned wider. It floated toward Ash and settled in front of him, drawing Gengar's ire. The stockier Ghost frowned and narrowed its lurid eyes.

"Oh, enough of your sulking," Agatha snapped all of a sudden.

Gengar jumped and glared at the old crone, dissolved into gas, and partially reformed over Ash's left shoulder.

"That's interesting," Morty said.

"Huh?" Ash said.

"Your Gengar. It appears to be jealous. It must have a powerful bond

with you to feel so strongly. Most Ghosts...don't feel much of anything except resentment and malice. It takes a long time to get them to see the world differently."

Banette blinked curiously at Morty and dug its hidden talons into the shoulder of his leather jerkin, leaving deep imprints. If he noticed, he didn't react.

"Jealousy is all well and good," Agatha grumbled, "but you've got a long way to go if you want to achieve the next level of Mediumship. Mismagius will help. Listen to it. And I'll be taking your Butterfree as recompense, by the way."

Butterfree had not moved from its new perch on Agatha's head. They made a queer sight, Agatha with her surly scowl, face like an unmade bed, and Butterfree the picture of elegance and grace as it carefully balanced with its silver wings. Agatha took the teacup Morty had prepared for her and sipped it, as though there were nothing more natural.

"Butterfree was the first Pokémon I ever actually caught on my own," Ash said, remembering the day when he entered Viridian Forest with Ivy and Gary.

"Then it's a fair trade," Agatha said.

He took a long, lingering look at Butterfree and reached for the Bug's Pokéball at his belt. He turned it over in his hand and smiled a little. "Gary said Butterfree wasn't a good choice in most battle situations 'cause it's so fragile. But Butterfree was my trump card when we stormed Fuchsia's Gym. Pretty sure I'd be Wurmple food in a ditch somewhere if it wasn't for that damned Bug."

Agatha scoffed. "Gary ought to learn a thing or two from you and your dumb luck. Che, just like Sam was at his age. Thought he knew everything..."

Ash frowned, but he let the jibe pass him by. It was just Agatha, and she usually had a point.

"Power and strength come in many forms, sometimes as we least expect them," she went on, more softly, gaze far away. "As Mediums, we can see what others can't. The question I want you, both of you, to ask yourselves is what to do when you see it. Because you will see it, long before the rest do. That decision—it can be a gift, or it can be a curse."

"What do you think?"

Morty blinked in surprise at Ash's sudden question. Banette was rocking on his shoulder and poked a stubby, frayed leg over it. But it slipped, unable to levitate like its Ghostly cousins, and Morty caught it in his arms without hesitation.

"A curse," he said readily. "But then, we are dealing with Ghosts."

He smiled amiably, and Banette made a muffled rattling sound through its zippered mouth. It took Ash a moment to realize that it was laughing.

"I assume we have a deal?" Agatha said.

"Huh? Oh, right." Ash handed over Butterfree's Pokéball and set it on the metal tray over her lap. "Oh, one more thing. Butterfree's nickname is Bebe."

Agatha looked at him like he'd just thrown one of the full hospital latrines in her face. "We'll see about that."

He hid his wince with a bright smile. "Well, we should probably get going. Morty, you ready? We're headin' out pretty soon."

"Yes, of course." He turned to Agatha and nodded. "I can make arrangements for your transport. Will you be heading back to Indigo Plateau?"

Agatha's face soured even more. "Of course not. The Elite Four are finished." She paused and shifted her gaze to Ash. "You let me know how things turn out with that turncoat Lance. Until then, I'll be in Lavender. Godforsaken shit hole can't get enough of me, I suppose."

Her hard gaze communicated her feelings more forcefully than her words ever could. She expected a full report of whatever was going down with Lance, and for Ash to still be breathing to deliver it.

Morty said nothing, and Ash nodded. "I'll try not to keep you waiting too long."

"Good. Now get out of here and let me get some rest."

The young men shared a final, parting glance with Agatha, but Ash didn't try to embrace her or utter any words of promise. Neither she nor Morty seemed the type. Instead, with Mismagius and Gengar

making up his second shadows and Pikachu scampering along at his feet, Ash made his way back outside the hospital alongside Morty.

The sun was creeping fast up the eastern horizon, and soon it would be time for them to part ways, possibly forever. Even so, Ash couldn't bring himself to worry much. After everything he'd survived, it was the surviving that scared him more now. Instinctively, he scratched his left shoulder where the skin was tight with old burn scars.

"She likes you a lot," Morty said as they made their way leisurely down the lava-plated road. "I've never seen her so lively."

Ash couldn't help but snort. "Lively? *Agatha*? Dude, are we even talkin' about the same lady here?"

Morty smiled kindly and the corners of his eyes crinkled, but somehow the look just gave Ash a chill. Morty had memorized the motion, but he conveyed nothing beyond the empty mechanics. Banette smiled with him, another painted mask concealing something malevolent and putrid within.

"Of course," Morty said. "I get the feeling you've rubbed off on her some." The smile faded, and even though Morty was only glancing at him askance, Ash got the full impact of whatever hid behind that carefully constructed façade and stopped in his tracks. "You're not what I expected."

Ash took a steadying breath, and Morty turned to wait for him. "How do you mean?"

"Your Ghosts use your body as their vessel. The more they haunt you, the more you reflect their image. But with you, it seems almost as if the opposite is happening. Your Gengar... It's very enthusiastic."

Ash adjusted the brim of his cap for no other reason than to let his hands do something other than tremble. "Nah, Gengar's always been like that. It likes to mess around, but it's come through for me every time."

Morty nodded, but didn't look convinced. "If you say so." He turned to continue walking, but stopped mid-step. "You can ask if you like."

"Huh?"

"About Banette. I know you've been wondering about it since yesterday." He paused before adding, "Not many people ask and truly

want to know."

The ragdoll Pokémon blinked at Ash, and once again he was struck by how *real* it looked. Solid, not like any Ghost he'd ever encountered. It didn't seem connected to Morty at all, no tethered aura or link whatsoever. He fell into step beside Morty again, and they continued walking.

"Okay, how 'bout this: Agatha said Ghosts can only exist here in two places—possessing Mediums or living on hallowed ground, like in Lavender. But Banette's not possessing you at all. How're you doing it?"

"Ah, that." He smiled a little to himself, perhaps remembering. "I guess Agatha didn't give you the whole story. Some Ghosts, like Banette, weren't always Ghosts. They became Ghosts because humans neglected or betrayed them."

"Became? Wait, like, Banette died or somethin'?"

"Not at all. Banette's species exists because children grow up. And when they grow up, they throw away their toys, dolls they loved so much and pretended were alive with all their hearts. When they threw away their dolls, all that love, the energy they poured into them, had to go somewhere. In Banette's case," Morty shifted the ragdoll in his arms, "it became a vengeful spirit full of hatred."

Banette made a muffled grinding sound as it chewed on its zippered mouth, red eyes never leaving Ash's. Despite himself, a spike of fear wheedled into his back between his shoulder blades, and his fingers twitched to itch the spot.

"Vengeful... What's that s'posed to mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. Banette feed on children's fears. Leave them at it for too long, and they'll kill the children. The grudge they carry is never sated, it just engorges. Left on their own, Banette could wipe out entire villages of their children. They don't need Mediums or hallowed ground to exist. They just possess spiritually rich objects. It...makes them a bit more dangerous than your average Ghost, in a sense. They're free to go where they please."

Ash swallowed hard. Banette was smaller than Gengar when it took on its semisolid form, barely two feet tall. It looked like it had taken a run through a sewer before getting hammered with a bat repeatedly. Easy to miss, save for those baleful red eyes.

"I found Banette locked in an abandoned house in the attic. The family had long since moved away, and the rest of the townsfolk had started complaining that the house was haunted. Strange noises in the night, the usual. Until one night, a brave old man went to investigate. He had a team of strong Pokémon with him, but thinking the townsfolk were overreacting and letting superstition cloud their judgment, he wasn't prepared for what awaited him.

"They found his body the next morning, mutilated almost beyond recognition. He hadn't had the chance to call out a single one of his Pokémon."

Ash listened, aghast at Morty's horrific tale but more disgusted by the fact that it didn't surprise him. He'd seen worse.

"Anyway, it became clear that the haunting was no mere superstition, and the townsfolk were determined to burn down the house and be done with it. They doused the brittle wood paneling with kerosene and piled stacks of dry hay for kindling. Then they threw their torches and watched as the house went up in flames. I had broken out of my mother's clutches and already run inside the front door when the exterior started to blaze."

"You ran inside a burning house? Geez, even I wouldn't do that."

"Yes, it was a foolish idea, I admit that. But then, children often have foolish ideas."

The truth hit Ash harder than he expected it would. "...You were a kid. How old?"

"Just nine at the time, and *very* foolish." He said it like they were discussing local restaurants or the weather. "But unlike that brave old man, I was a true believer. So when I made my way to the attic, I thought I was ready to face whatever was up there. I didn't expect to find a worn out, old ragdoll splattered with blood and no weapon in sight.

"But I didn't think much about it. The fire was spreading fast, and even a nine-year-old has some sense of self-preservation. I scooped up the doll, which was heavy. I remember it was heavy at the time, and that worried me. Not the blood or the empty room, just that it was heavy. I dragged my feet toward the door, but the fire was ravenous. It had caught up to me. So my only choice was to head deeper into the attic.

"I don't recall exactly what happened next, but I've been shown.

Ghosts can show you things, you know. Apparently, I backed up against the wall, sweating and coughing from the smoke. I clutched the doll to my chest like a shield, and somehow I found a window. The glass was hot from the heat of the fire and smeared with grime from years of neglect, and it didn't break under my small fists. I supposed I could have thrown the doll at the window and broken it that way, but I didn't want to let it go. It might have burned. I remember thinking that, it's very clear in my mind even now. If the doll had burned, that would have been worse than anything that could have happened to me.

"So I kept pounding on the window. By then, the fire had caught up to me and started to eat the flesh on the backs of my legs. I was wearing shorts, it was summer. I remember because I had sandals on, and the rubber soles melted and glued me to the floor. But still I pounded and pounded on the window. Until finally, the smoke seemed to rise up all around me and burst through the window and the entire back wall of the attic. Like I said, I don't recall much of the events because the smoke was suffocating me, but I was shown long after the fact that the smoke ripped my body off the floor, tore my melted shoes off, and flung me through the hole in the wall. The attic was three stories above the ground, but I landed safely, the flames on my legs snuffed out.

"It didn't take long for my mother and the other townsfolk to find me and rush me to the local clinic. I had third degree burns all over my legs and buttocks. At my age, the doctor said I should have died from the smoke inhalation, let alone the massive trauma of the burns. But I didn't." He paused then as they passed the entrance to Mt. Cinnabar, guarded as usual while construction teams continued to clean up the area where the lava had done the most damage. "Throughout the whole operation, I wouldn't let go of that filthy doll I'd scavenged from the attic. My mother said that when anyone tried to take it from me, even when I was unconscious, I went into a hysteric frenzy and bit and scratched at anyone who got too close. I don't remember that either."

"Banette," Ash said. "You saved that Banette, and it saved you, even after it killed that guy. But you said Banette hate children."

"Children, yes. But not Mediums. I suppose my grand-uncle may have stood a chance had he been a Medium, too."

Ash paled. "That brave old man..."

"He was our village's protector at the time, an early Gym Leader before they were called that. Ecruteak has always been a small town, but certain historical events keep us on the radars of a lot of people with importance. After what happened at the haunted house, one of those important people decided to drop in for a visit. I'm sure you can take a guess who."

"...Agatha."

Morty nodded. "The doctors had all but given up trying to treat my grievous wounds, and even my mother was too afraid to stay at my bedside as long as Banette was there. I imagine...it must have been hard for them, seeing what they had reluctantly believed in for so long. I suppose it didn't help that Banette had killed my grand-uncle."

This guy...

"Agatha showed up, and everything changed. She nursed me back to health herself and stayed by my side the whole time. She taught me what I was, what it meant. I lost my village that day, but in a way, I gained something without which I would've lost myself." He glanced down at Banette, and Banette looked up at him, curious. "Well, two things."

They fell into silence for several steps. The ocean breeze was coming in balmy and pleasant on this cloudless, perfect day. Perhaps involuntarily, Ash couldn't be sure, people stepped aside to avoid them as they passed, distracted by their morning errands. Or maybe it was something else, something much more primal that they felt in their bones, a rattling that warned them, 'Stay away' or they, too, could wander into an attic and never come out again.

Ash had never noticed it. Ivy, Gary, and Lily had always been with him. He'd never noticed.

"Nine-years-old," Ash ventured, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "That's what, more than fifteen years ago? I wonder how many people's lives you've saved keeping Banette with you all that time?"

This time, Morty was the one to stop in his tracks and stare openly. "I'm sorry?"

Ash shrugged. "I just meant it's way more'n I've ever helped. Maybe more than I ever will, I dunno. And now you're a Gym Leader, right? So you didn't lose your village, not for good, at least. I mean, you did save them all when you went after Banette when you think about it."

He smiled a little and leaned over to be at eye-level with Banette. "Bet you were really lonely till he showed up, huh? But now you'll be together forever, and it won't matter what anybody else thinks."

Banette's smile tugged at the stitched sides of its zippered mouth, and it laughed its rattling laugh, eyes dancing with mirth. Ash grinned back.

When he stood up again, Morty was looking at him with such raw emotion in his dark eyes that Ash hardly recognized him. It was gone in an instant, like he hadn't wanted to be caught looking like that.

"I never thought about it that way," he admitted softly.

"I can tell. But you know? That's the only way I can see it." He shoved his hands in his pockets again, and Pikachu leaped up onto his shoulder to perch, squeaking happily.

He almost didn't notice it, but Morty spared him a small smile. This time, it conveyed the truth of that raw emotion Ash had witnessed moments ago.

"I can tell."

They had made it to a private section of the harbor reserved for the Cinnabar Gym's naval fleet, where a wide section of beach had been paved over with stone and mortar to act as a landing zone for the CATs.

"There you are!" Ivy called out to Ash and Morty. "C'mon, it's almost time to go!"

Everyone had gathered on the landing strip and looked to be saddling Pokémon and bidding each other farewell. Ash waved back.

"You comin'?" he said to Morty.

"Yes, I'm right behind you."

Ash smiled his trademark, cheesy smile and jogged ahead. Morty followed at a more sedate pace, hands in his pockets while Banette joined Misdreavus at his shoulder, content to linger in the younger man's shadow.

Lily had slept fitfully, but any hope of rest was now far out of reach as

every passing moment drew near the zero hour of her burgeoning fears and inescapable reality. She stood now on the tarmac where countless soldiers, battle-ready and prepared to die, had stood before her, men and women far better and nobler than she would ever be.

"So you're going then?"

Clair towered over her like some ancient goddess carved of marble by a pious artist's skilled fingers. The sharp curvature of her unusually high cheekbones cut through the soft sunbeams and cast jagged shadows across her face, somehow enhancing her beauty even more. Everything about her was just a little too sharp, a little too chiseled to be human. Beautiful, undoubtedly, but *other*. Lily wondered why she hadn't noticed it before, but as she tucked some of her bangs behind an ear, she realized she hadn't looked in the mirror herself for weeks. What would she see there?

"Yes, I'm going." Lily mustered all the confidence she didn't feel, if not for her own sake then for Clair's. To cower would not be a weakness—what she was facing deserved a certain measure of humility and fear. But to do it in front of the person who could not, would not do the deed herself was far worse.

They were all here, the groups from Kanto and Johto rallied long ago by two anonymous orphans given the dehumanized names of 'Green' and 'Silver'. Ivy stood with Marco as she tried to convince him of something unpleasant, judging by the look on his partially bandaged face. Gary talked quietly with Rosa, Lyra, and Ethan, grim-faced but determined. Falkner was alone, his foot tapping impatiently and Noctowl and Xatu preening and cooing as they sensed his agitation. Even Blaine, Marla, and Carvalho had shown up to see off the youths. Only Ash and Morty were unaccounted for, and Lily had a feeling that was no coincidence.

Ash wasn't here to save her from Clair, she couldn't rely on the comfort of his mere presence. And she silently convinced herself she didn't need it, just as she convinced herself all night she didn't need Ivy's condolence.

"Then I doubt we'll meet again," Clair said.

It was not angry or sad or surprised. She said it like she said her own name, casually confident and without much need for further thought. If Lily left to confront Lance, she would not live to tell about it.

And it was that, precisely, that was Clair's biggest flaw. Maybe she'd

tried it before, maybe she'd loved someone who did—maybe she loved Lance himself. None of it mattered, whatever the story. Her fear was palpable, but it wasn't for Lily.

"Why're you so afraid of him?" she blurted out. "Why?"

Clair studied her a good long while, perhaps committing her to memory. It did little for Lily's nerves. "You know nothing, Lily Kida." Their shared last name was broken glass crushed beneath Clair's wrought-iron tone. "You mistake your ignorance for courage. It's a terrible quality."

"You're wrong." Lily's voice came out harsher than she'd intended, but it got Clair's attention. Under the scrutiny of those eyes that could flay the soul from a man's body, Lily's next words came rather easily. "I am afraid. I...I'm terrified, more than I've ever been. You think you can run and hide behind your castle walls like what he's doing won't blow back on you, won't wipe out everything you know and love.

"Well, I'm not running. Maybe I'm diluted, some lowlife not even worth looking at. Fine, I can live with that. But not growing up to be you had one advantage—I'm gonna try to do the right thing. At least I can say I did something. What can you say?"

To Clair's credit, she held her composure like a champ. Even under such a subtly scathing tirade, she didn't once attempt to interrupt. But she didn't have to. It was all over her achingly beautiful face—pity.

"Whatever it is, I'll still be alive to say it."

"There you are!" Ivy's voice cut through the din of conversation. "C'mon, it's almost time to go!"

All eyes turned to see Ash jogging to join the group with Pikachu at his shoulder. Morty followed a short distance behind in no semblance of a hurry, but there was no need—Falkner was more than happy to meet him halfway.

"About time. Where the hell've you been?" he demanded.

Morty cast him a sparing glance and kept going toward Lyra and Ethan. "Just getting a different perspective."

Falkner rolled his eyes like there was no possible way this morning could go any worse for him.

"It's about time you four started off. Shamouti Island's a hard fly due south of here," Blaine said gruffly. "You'll want to do as little night flying as possible. The storms over the Noveno are the worst you'll ever encounter."

Noveno, the ninth ocean, was the largest continuous expanse of water this side of Sinnoh. It stretched from southern Kanto and Johto, where the Sea of Seasons hugged the coast, through the scattered Orange Islands far to the south, and finally bled into the arctic waters of the Settimo, the seventh ocean. Keep going and you would empty out into the Ottavo and Sesto, the eighth and sixth oceans, respectively that marked the beginnings of Unova and Kalos territory far on the other side of the world. That is, if you could somehow navigate the treacherous icebergs and frozen deserts floating in the Settimo, not to mention the wild Wailord, Sharpedo, and Walrein that made the frigid waters their hunting grounds.

Ash made his way toward where Lily was standing near Clair, having zeroed in on her when he arrived. He smiled as Lily listened to Blaine's advice.

"How many days to reach Shamouti Island?" Gary said, joining them.

"Depends on your Flyer," Marla said. "My Charizard can make it in eight, but that's assuming clear skies all the way."

"They're gonna be worn out," Gary said more to himself than to anyone else.

"But that means Lance will be, too," Lily said. "He has a Dragonite, right? It'll be his main Flyer."

"Don't count on it," Clair said.

Ash, true to form, turned on the stony-faced Gym Leader. "Hey, you're his cousin, right? Like, you know the guy pretty well?"

Clair gave nothing away. "Better than most, if that's what you mean."

"So why don't you give us a hand? He probably wouldn't expect you, right?"

"Because unlike you lot, I have a responsibility to the people of Blackthorn City. You may have helped rid Kanto of Team Rocket, but Pryce remains at large in my backyard. My priorities lie elsewhere."

"Well, can you at least give us a tip or anything? Like, does he have any weaknesses? Maybe allergies or somethin'?"

Gary elbowed Ash hard in the gut. "Cut it out, dumbass."

Clair looked between them, and Lily bit her cheek so hard it began to bleed.

"Weaknesses? I've known Lance all our lives, and I can tell you with absolute certainty that he has none. None that you could exploit, in any case." She shifted her gaze to Lily then. "Hypothetically speaking, if I were to face him, then I suppose all that would matter is that I'm like him, a Titan bred and born. As long as I know myself, then I know him, too." She flipped her perfect hair. "Assuming, of course, that I can separate the two.

"But it doesn't matter. Lance is the strongest Titan our clan has ever produced, maybe the strongest in the world. Disregarding that would be a fatal error."

Gary tried to catch Lily's eye, but she was too focused on Clair and the scaly sharpness about her that crossed the line between beautiful and exotic.

"So Morty, what's the plan when we get back to Ecruteak City?" Ethan asked.

"To use the Clear Bell," Morty nodded toward Lyra, its keeper, "and see if we can't make a miracle happen."

Falkner scoffed. "Some plan."

"It'll work," Lyra said softly. "It has to. Entei, Raikou, and Suicune are our best shot at taking on a Pokémon as strong as Ho-oh. We have to try."

"Wait, wait, wait," Ethan said. "What if, like, they don't wake up? I mean, do we even know *how* to wake them up? What if they're pissed we woke 'em up?"

"Only someone with pure intentions can make the Clear Bell ring true. If the beasts hear it, they'll come. That's what the legend says," Morty said.

"Every tried ringing it yourself?"

Morty crossed his arms and looked a point on the ground. "...Once. It didn't work."

Ethan swiveled his hat around so the bill was at the back of his head. "Well, fuck."

"Hah, that just means your intentions weren't *pure*," Falkner goaded. "Not that I'm surprised."

"It will work for you," Morty insisted. "Entei bequeathed the bell to Marco. He was meant to have it. Maybe you all were, I don't know. We'll find out soon enough."

Ivy had let Crobat out and was busy adjusting its saddle for the long journey south, while Marco looked on, his Weavile at his side.

"It's for the best," Marco was saying. "Your friends need you more than I do right now. And when it's all over..."

"We'll be together again," Ivy said. "I know."

Marco patted Crobat's side, a small smile on his lips. The big bat allowed the contact, twitching its ears forward.

"You know," Ivy said as she watched them. "I came here alone, and I meant to keep it that way, like we said we would. I dunno how it turned into this." She indicated the others spread out on the tarmac. "But I'm glad it did. Not just 'cause they saved my life and stuff." She fiddled with a particularly stubborn buckle on Crobat's saddle. "But, I dunno, I guess I'm just glad I didn't have to do it alone. And I'm glad you didn't have to, either."

Marco laid a hand on her shoulder. "Me, too. Ethan and Lyra...they changed my life. I can't explain it, but I can't imagine going on without them." He winced. "Damn, I've gotten soft."

Ivy snorted. "You were always soft. I was the asshole, remember?"

"That's not how I remember it," he said with a smile.

Marco ran his hand over Crobat's gouged out eye around the patch covering it, careful in his ministrations but somehow able to soothe the bat. Maybe it was natural, who could say, or maybe it was something more. That bat had been through the worst of Team Rocket's hell, and Marco and Ivy knew a thing or two about katabatic escapes.

"Oh, that reminds me." Ivy shrugged off her pack and rummaged around it. "I got this for you. Thought it'd make you look super badass."

She produced a small, black eyepatch identical to Crobat's, but smaller to cover a human eye socket. Marco stared at it, deadpan.

"What the hell is that."

"Your eyepatch, idiot. Here." She tugged at the dressing around his left eye before he could put up a fight and managed to get it off. There was a bandage taped over his eye socket, which she carefully pulled back. He relaxed under her touch, but his fists were clenched.

"Ivy, I don't..."

"Shut up. You know I hate masks."

He shut up and averted his gaze, perhaps ashamed, but he said nothing more. His left eye was completely gone, in its place a badly scabbed, hollowed out stretch of skin like something out of a zombie horror flick. Ivy kept her face carefully schooled, but Marco knew her better than anyone. There were no masks between them. She blinked before any sign of tears could manifest, and he said nothing.

"Lemme just slip this over your head...the bangs, here, to the side...yeah, just like that... Okay, done."

Marco raised a hand to his left eye, which was now bandage-less and covered by a fitted, black eyepatch. Ivy had pulled some of his bushy, red hair over the strap to conceal it from the back. She stepped back, satisfied with her work, and smirked.

"There. Now you and Batty match."

"Just what I always wanted, to be compared to a bat."

Ivy smoothed his bangs out. Aside from the scabs that would fade to scars at the edges of the eyepatch, he looked the same as she remembered—tanned skin, too-long hair, rusty stubble from forgetting to shave, a crooked nose. The look of calm in the face of a storm that had been her only comfort years in the darkness. Without thinking, Ivy pulled him into a fierce embrace.

They said nothing, and he held her gently like he used to, something to hang onto while the winds and rain swept over them.

"The next time we see each other, this will all be over," he whispered.

She buried her face in his neck and breathed deeply. "Yeah. Just a little more."

Gary watched them in silence, thoughtful, but he didn't move to interrupt them. Blaine was watching him as Marla explained how to get to Shamouti Island in the heart of the Orange Islands far to the south. He barely heard her.

"Be sure to break during the night. The whirlpools get fierce the farther south you go, so land when you can. Orange isn't like the Seafoam Islands. They're spread out for miles with nothing but blue in between, so you don't want to get lost at sea," Marla explained.

Ash released Charizard, who was healed back to its old self and loathing the dreaded saddle Ash brandished at it. When he got close enough to sling it over Charizard's back, the pseudo-Dragon growled and snapped its powerful jaws in warning.

"Goddamnit, Charizard, for once just cooperate, will you?" Ash grumbled.

Lily hardly noticed the usual bickering between trainer and Pokémon. Clair had released her Dragonite and was checking the saddle, and Lily just stared. The beast was almost as big across as Aerodactyl with twice the girth, and it wasn't even as big as the species got. She knew this from her work as a scientist. More importantly, she had something to compare it to—the lone Dragonite she'd seen cruising over an erupting Mt. Cinnabar. That was was easily larger than Aerodactyl, a true monster of a Dragon cutting through the smoke and ash. She didn't know how she knew, but that had been Lance. Why had he come? Why then? Maybe she would never know, and it didn't matter, in the grand scheme of things.

He was real. And he was waiting.

"*Daughter of Dragons, the one you seek is nigh.*"

A hand in hers startled her.

"Lily? Hey, you okay? I've been callin' your name for like a minute now," Ash said.

Lily pulled away instinctively, but immediately regretted it at the look of concern in his red eyes. "Hm? Sorry, I guess I was spacing. Are we

ready to go?"

Gary released Aerodactyl, who was already saddled. "Ready when you are."

Dodrio and Omastar were still at the Pokémon Center, but they couldn't afford to wait any longer. Nurse Joy had assured Lily that her two Pokémon would make a full recovery in time, but they had taken too much damage in the fight and it was a miracle Dodrio was still alive. She felt lighter, almost naked without their Pokéballs at her belt. Only Pikachu and her Dragons remained.

ChuChu batted her ponytail, as if sensing her thoughts, and squeaked.

"You can ride in front, ChuChu, okay?" she said, mustering a small smile.

The yellow rodent squeaked happily and jumped to the ground.

Everyone said their goodbyes. Gary and Ethan clapped hands and pushed each other around a bit, promising to pay their old master, Chuck, a visit when this was all over. Lyra and Ivy talked animatedly while Marco listened, looking like he was just ready to get a move on so he wouldn't have to put up with whatever silliness they were discussing. Rosa approached Ash.

"I never thought I'd say this, but I guess I never met a real Medium before." She extended her hand. "It's been an honor, all of you. I mean that."

Ash shook her hand and smiled. "Hey, back at you. The only other Sylvan I met was a real princess, and not in a good way."

"I suppose you'll be finishing things with the Elite Four now? Good luck. We don't have anything like your Elite Four in Unova, but I can imagine."

"Thanks. But he's just one guy, and we got four of us. I like our odds."

Rosa studied him a moment. "Ash, about Professor Oak. He was the most decent man I've ever known. If you or your friends ever need anything, I owe him my life."

Ash grinned. "Don't worry about it. Far's I'm concerned, you've done more than enough. We'd be toast if you hadn't shown up here. But hey, if I'm ever in Unova, I'll look you up. You helped us out here a

ton, so it's only fair I return the favor one day if I can. You never know when those Team Plasma guys might get outta hand, right?"

Rosa hesitated. "...Right, yeah. I'll keep that in mind." She took a moment to appraise Clair's massive Dragonite, but she kept her composure well for a first-timer. "Titans, huh," she said more to herself than to Ash. "For not being real Tamers, they seem to have something just as good to be able to command Dragons."

Ash followed her gaze to Clair and Dragonite, but settled finally on Lily. "Yeah, I'm startin' to see what you mean by that."

Gary gave Lily a hand up onto the back of Aerodactyl's saddle and strapped her in. Carvalho, Marla, and Blaine looked on.

"I've already sent word to Kumquat Island about what's going on," Carvalho explained. "With any luck, the Orange Navy will be mobilized and get a perimeter set up around Shamouti and the surrounding islands. But don't count on their help—nobody gets close to that clusterfuck. Full of whirlpools even their best captains know to steer clear of."

"Thank you," Gary said. "Anything they can do to box in Lance and whatever he's cooking up will help."

"Don't count on it," Blaine said. "You four'll be on your own down there. You'd be smart not to forget that."

Gary and Lily exchanged a look. "Either way, Cinnabar'll be our first stop after it's over," he said. "There's a conversation I'd like to finish."

Lily said nothing, afraid speaking would undo the composure she'd carefully cultivated in her sleepless night. Just the thought of Mewtwo being held captive turned her stomach. But it wasn't a problem she could think about now. It would have to wait.

Blaine's glare didn't waver. "Off with you, now."

"C'mon, ChuChu," Lily called to the little rodent still on the ground.

It was busy pawing at Ethan's pant leg, and he kneeled down to give it a good scratch on the nose.

"Hey, little cutie," he said. "Gonna miss me?"

Lyra grinned. "Maybe you should catch a Pikachu for your team."

"Yeah, that'd be cool. They're hard to come by, though. Shy little things in the wild."

Marco and Falkner released a small army of Flyers to transport their party back to Ecruteak City. The two of them settled in between their twin Skarmory, while Lyra ran her fingers through Honchkrow's thick, ebony feathers and earned a pleasant coo. Pidgeot waited patiently as Falkner checked its saddle for Morty.

"Well, I guess this is bye for now," Ash said. He bent down to scoop up Lily's Pikachu. "See you guys after the last two assholes're history?"

Ethan chuckled. "You got it, dude."

Everyone mounted up, and Ash headed to Aerodactyl to pass Pikachu up to Lily.

"Hey, Lily, I've been thinking a lot about what you said back at the Seafoam Islands," he began.

"Huh?"

"Hey, I'm getting grey hairs over here," Ivy called. "We ready to go?"

"Yeah," Gary said as he buckled himself into the front of Aerodactyl's saddle. Lily's Pikachu scrambled up his back to perch on his shoulder and stuck its pink tongue out to taste the honey salted air. "Ready, Lily?"

"Yeah, sure."

Ash pulled his cap down more firmly over his head, the conversation over before it had started. Maybe it wasn't a good time, he reasoned. Charizard was getting more irritable by the minute as it was forced to stay grounded wearing that damned leather contraption on its back like a pack horse. Marla ran her hand over its neck, and the pseudo-Dragon snorted but allowed the contact. Ash swung into the saddle, and miraculously Charizard didn't growl at him.

Marla blinked up at him. "Your Charizard has a hell of a temper."

"Freakin' tell me about it," Ash said. "But he's saved my ass a buncha times. So I figure he can have his temper if he wants."

Marla gave Charizard one final pat. "You come back here when you're through down south and I'll give you a real lesson in Charizard flying.

From what I saw the other day, you need it."

Ash smiled at her backhanded well wishes. "Count on it. Me 'n Charizard'll be back before you know it."

She nodded stiffly, the thick, red ringlets that escaped her ponytail bouncing a little. Pikachu settled on Charizard's head, its little paws gripping one of the horns, while Gengar and Mismagius floated behind Ash as disembodied shadows.

"We're off," Clair announced before anyone could beat her to it.

In a great whoosh of air, Dragonite huffed and pushed off the tarmac. Lily lowered her goggles just as the gust hit her, and she was sure she would have slipped off the saddle if she wasn't firmly strapped in. Morty and Pidgeot were quick to follow, then Ethan, Lyra, and Marco. Rosa and Swanna shot into the sky next, northbound. Gary patted Aerodactyl.

"Let's Fly, Rocky," he shouted over the rushing wind.

Aerodactyl squawked and launched into the air, Crobat and Charizard not far behind. Blaine, Marla, and Carvalho followed them with their eyes, shrinking fast on the black tarmac as the group rose higher into the air. Soon, Cinnabar's full perimeter was in view as Aerodactyl scaled the height of Mt. Cinnabar. Marco lingered behind on Skarmory and waved to Ivy. Lily watched their last parting, but Gary directed Aerodactyl south and she lost sight of them.

With the horizon glittering to the south for miles, blue and wild, and the island she called home shrinking fast behind, Lily closed her eyes to the endless blue on all sides, nowhere to turn away from it now.

For the first time on this harrowing journey, she had a sense of the end drawing near.

The journey would take a total of eleven days and nights, all but the first and last days of which were plagued by maelstroms and wild whirlpools bigger than any Lily had ever imagined. And they only got bigger the farther sound the group flew. Carvalho had not been joking about the perilous seas, and if it wasn't for Mismagius's cloak over Charizard to keep its tail flame blazing through the torrential rains, Lily was sure they never would have made it past Hamlin Island.

Waterlogged physically and emotionally, the group tended toward

silence and solitude as they huddled for warmth around dying, wind-abused campfires under makeshift lean-tos and leaky caves. Lily's usual cheer had taken a hard blow from the weather and the prospect of the never-ending ocean closing in on all sides, so it was left to Ash to entertain the others and keep their spirits up.

"Uh, I dunno, Snorlax," Ivy said.

Ash sighed and shook his head, but the game prevented him from talking. He took a deep breath and puffed out his cheeks and bulged his eyes, pantomiming a queer dance.

"Gary, you guess, I've guessed like three times," Ivy said.

"This game is stupid," Gary protested.

Ash put his hands on the sides of his head and reached up, like he was running his hands along invisible spikes on his head.

"Horns?" Lily ventured. "Oh wait, I know! You're a fat Pinsir!"

Ash hung his head forlornly. Outside their small cave, the wind howled and rain pounded the roof, leaking through natural grooves and weaknesses in the stone.

"Oh gimme a break," Gary grumbled. "He's obviously Wigglytuff."

Wigglytuff, who was busy munching on some kelp it had found somewhere, looked up from its spot between Lily and Ivy, eyes wide and ears twitching.

"Finally!" Ash said. "And you thought this game was stupid."

"It *is* stupid. That doesn't mean I'm not good at it."

"Well if your shit's so rosy, *you* try it."

"Woo!" Ivy cheered on the argument. "Take your shirts off!"

Gary shot her a venomous look, but she just laughed. Lily bit back a smile at their antics.

Defeated and with his pride on the line, Gary grumbled something under his breath and moved to stand in front of the fire. Arcanine lifted its massive head at the loss of warmth and whined a little, but Ivy patted the big dog reassuringly.

Fishing out his Pokédex, Gary entered in a command that popped up a random search. After a couple seconds, the device beeped and indicated a Pokémon randomly selected for him to act out. He scowled deeply.

"This one's impossible. I'm picking another one."

"No way!" Ash said. "That's cheating. You have to act out whatever one it picks, no take backs."

He settled in next to Pikachu on Lily's other side and flashed her a bright grin. Despite herself, she blushed a little and averted her gaze.

"What? That wasn't a rule before!" Gary protested.

"Oh c'mon," Ivy said. "Just do it already. Entertain us!"

"Goddamnit." Gary pocketed his Pokédex and shook out his hands, mentally preparing himself for whatever new humiliation he was in for. "Okay, here goes."

He bent one leg at the knee and wiggled it behind him, then bent over and tucked his arms by his sides like wings, flapping them. The eternal scowl never left his face.

"Um..." Lily said.

Ash burst out laughing and didn't even bother guessing. "Dude, you look so retarded!"

Gary flushed with anger. "Shut up, Ash!"

"Hey, no talking!" Ivy said. "That's the rule. So c'mon, give us some more hints."

Rolling his eyes, Gary puffed out his cheeks and swayed his head. Lily began to giggle to herself.

"Okay, okay," Ash said, trying to control his laughter. "Uh, how 'bout Dodrio?"

Gary gaped in horror. "Are you serious? Do I *look* like a fucking Do—"

"No talking!" Ivy snapped. "And for the record, that was gonna be my guess. Let's see..."

Exasperated but unable to say a word unless he wanted to lose by

default, Gary kept his mouth shut and continued to wiggle on one leg. He began to lose his balance and started hopping.

"Oh, I know! Hoothoot!" Lily announced.

Gary shot her a death glare that could have burned a hole through her armor, but Lily didn't notice.

"Huh, I really dunno," Ash said. "Gary, you're pretty shitty at this game."

With a frustrated sigh, Gary righted himself. "Forget this. It's not my fault you guys all suck at guessing." He stomped back to his place next to Ivy and laid back against Arcanine.

Ivy laughed and put a hand on his thigh. "Aw, I thought you looked kinda cute up there hopping around."

"Shut up."

"Wait, so what were you?" Lily asked.

Gary rolled his eyes. "Dewgong, obviously."

No one said a word, and Lily and Ash exchanged a look. It was a mistake, because the minute she laid eyes on Ash, they both burst out laughing.

"Dude, that was the *worst* Dewgong I've ever seen!" he guffawed.

"Ha ha, hilarious, glad to be of some entertainment," Gary said.

That was the last time any of them laughed on this final leg of the journey. The storm broke on the last day and the waters were eerily calm, the group's desire to laugh spirited away along with the rains and winds that had been their near constant companion these final days. The calm didn't soothe Lily's nerves as perhaps it otherwise would have. They were close, within the eye of the storm, the stillness stifling before the worst of the hell would break before them.

In that stillness on the last night before what might be the last day of her life, Lily stood on the beach of the small, deserted island they had found. It was more of a sandbar, really, and if she looked behind her she could easily see the other side of it. It was no more than a mile long and half as wide, with a thin copse of palm trees standing tall and skinny toward the northern edge. That was where Ivy, Gary, and

Ash made camp while she skirted away for a walk, some time alone.

The sea pulled at the sandy shore, its black waves creeping closer and closer, it seemed to her eyes, but they never reached her. There was hardly any moon tonight, just a sliver of crescent. Tomorrow would be a new moon, and only the stars would light the way.

"Whoa, check it out."

Ash's voice startled her out of her thoughts, and Lily blinked. He was looking out to sea, and she followed his gaze. All of a sudden, she realized she hadn't been registering the sight at all, so caught up in her head. The black waters lapped at the shore and reflected the stars above, but a little farther out into the shallows brighter lights glowed just below the surface, undulating and golden like hundreds of little suns.

Ash had his Pokédex out as he registered the lights. "Chinchou, a whole school of 'em. Wow."

Lily hugged her arms for warmth, though the night was balmy compared to the days and days of endless storming. Ash stood casually next to her. Their Pikachu were off with Ivy and Gary, probably eating, so they found themselves alone together on the quiet, black beach full of false suns and stars.

"You've been really quiet. Not yourself," Ash said, pocketing his Pokédex.

"Just preparing myself for what's coming."

He looked down at her. "Alone?"

"*You're not alone,"* Ivy had promised her back in her small apartment their last night on Cinnabar.

She said nothing, and Ash sank into the sand next to her, mimicking her position. They sat together in silence, their only company the lapping waves and the wandering will-o-wisps drowned beneath them.

"You guys'll have your hands full with the legendary birds and Lugia," Lily said after a while. "Someone has to worry about Lance himself."

Ash yawned loudly and lay back to get a clear view of the billions of stars visible on this clear night. "It's a beautiful night."

"Hey, did you hear me?"

"C'mere, you can see it better if you lie back."

He tugged on her arm and pulled her back. A little irritated but unwilling to argue, Lily lay back and got an eyeful of the diamond-dusted sky above. Her shoulder brushed against Ash's, their armor temporarily discarded in exchange for plain clothes on the last night before they would have to enter the battlefield one last time.

"Awesome, huh?" he said. "Hey, that one looks kinda like Pika, don't you think?"

He traced a constellation with his finger, but she couldn't hope to pick out the one he was talking about. So she just smiled a little.

"Sure."

"Hey, Lily?"

"Yeah?"

"What do you want?"

She frowned. "What do I want?"

"Yeah. I was thinkin' about it a lot lately. Back on Seafoam, you said I didn't know what you wanted." He laughed to himself. "I can be a little dense sometimes, you know? I guess it took me a while to realize I didn't know. Doesn't matter what I think or whatever. It's up to you."

Her mind faded back in time to the Seafoam Islands, and a blush heated her neck and cheeks. She pinched her lips together instinctively as she recalled how she'd kissed him out of the blue.

"I know I said not to wait too long, but I don't think now's a good time to..."

To what?

"It's the best time," Ash said softly. "Look, I made a mistake once. I'll probably pay for it for the rest of my life, but I'm okay with that now. I accept it. But I'm not gonna make the same mistake again with you." He turned his head to look at her, and she felt his gaze on her profile. "I don't need anymore time."

Lily took a breath and was a little surprised to find her throat

clenched and quaking. "Ash..."

"I know what you meant, about that first time back in Saffron, when I jumped out of Silph Tower after you," he went on. "I felt it, too. And I wasted all this time—" He cut himself off and laid a hand over his eyes under the brim of his ratty cap. "I wasted all this time pretending I didn't fall for you since that first moment."

She couldn't say when the tears had started, they coated her temples and fell about her ears into the sand, darkening it. The stars above seemed to blend together into a wash of milky light, faint splotches on a dark canvas.

"So, you know," Ash went on, "I thought since you know what I want now, I'd finally ask what *you* want."

He waited, silent and still as the night sky, and Lily trembled trying to keep her tears at bay.

What do I want?

"I—" Her voice hitched, and it gave her away.

Ash propped himself up on an elbow and saw her tears, alarmed. "Lily? Hey, what's wrong? Look, I didn't mean to make you cry. Shit."

She rubbed her eyes and face with her hands before he could and suppressed a sob. He laid one of his hands on the other side of her head, boxing her in but hovering over her to give her some space as he waited.

"Lily?"

"I want," she began, trying to compose herself. Wiping some of the excess tears from her cheeks, she let her hands fall and looked up at him. "I wanna be strong, like Gary."

His eyes looked down in question, but the floodgates were open and there was no closing them.

"I wanna be fearless, like Ivy. And I wanna be brave, like you. But I can't, and I'm not. I'm just a scientist, I'm just a kid, and I don't know anything. I don't know *anything*, Ash. Everything I thought I knew..." She thought of Mewtwo floating in its watery prison deep in the bowels of Mt. Cinnabar, suffering for everyone else's prosperity. She thought of Clair and how easily the older woman had dismissed her.

"It's all wrong. It's all wrong, and I just... I just wanna say I can do it, but I'm not you. I'm not like you. I can't believe the words."

He let her finish, not once interrupting even as she wiped more stubborn tears from her eyes and choked on her own words. Patient, like he'd never been before.

"You don't hafta be like me," he said softly. "If you were, you probably wouldn't still be here."

She sat up in the sand, one hand around her knee to keep her upright, and Ash pulled back to face her. "Please, don't try to cheer me up."

"I'm not. I don't think I could cheer anyone up right now if I tried." He said it with a bit of a laugh, but there was no humor in it. "But we'll make it out tomorrow, I know we will."

She shook her head, afraid she might start crying again. "How do you do it? How're you so confident all the time?"

"'Cause I look at Gary and Ivy, and I feel like I got a reason to keep pulling stupid stunts on the off-chance it'll save our asses. I think about all the people we've met—Surge and Jenny, Agatha, Rosa, Brock and Misty, hell, even Erika—and I know they're countin' on me. I look at you, and I feel like I can get through anything. I'm not alone out here."

"But we *are* alone. There won't be any help coming, no backup or reinforcements. It's just us out there. God, Ash, doesn't that scare you?"

"It scares the shit outta me. But Blaine was wrong, there *is* such a thing as heroes. They're the ones that're the most scared, and they still stand up and fight."

She let her eyes fall closed. "I wish I could see it like you do."

His hand on her cheek startled her, and she opened her eyes again. He was leaning close, close enough to smell the musk of sweat and salt and smoke from Charizard's smolder on him.

"Then just take a look."

The way he was looking at her now, even in the shade of night, there was no ignoring the raw emotion and truth reflected in his eyes. No one had ever looked at her like that, like he saw every part, the ugly

and the timid, the doubting and the selfish, and kept going until he found the truth held dearly underneath.

She lifted her small hands and threaded her fingers through his unruly hair, and his hat slipped off and rolled to the side.

"Show me," she whispered, desperate.

He closed the distance between them and finally returned the kiss she'd instigated weeks ago with surprising passion. Tears forgotten, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. Somewhere along the way in their entanglement, she lost her ponytail and he gathered up her hair in a fist. Waves chilled their bare feet, but they hardly noticed as they lost themselves in each other.

"I want," Lily said as he moved from her mouth to her neck. "I want..."

His hand traced the curve of her waist, a simple touch that nonetheless stole her words. In her mind they were falling again. Countless stories of steel and glass rushed past them, a dark, roiling sea opened its maw to swallow them far below, and she held onto him.

"*I gotcha."*

She buried her face in the crook of his neck, just hanging on, and he held her close, back to the ocean, rocking slightly with the rhythm of the waves.

I've got you.

"I'm here with you," he whispered against her hair. "Whatever happens, I'll be here with you. You're not alone."

She couldn't be sure how long they stayed there together, lost on a starlit sea with no beacon to follow and only each other to buoy them. Ships and searchlights could have passed them by, and still they held on, floating, alone together.

She drifted off to sleep and dreamed of falling.

He had planned for pain. There was always pain in great endeavors, otherwise anyone would be tempted to undertake them. Pain he could withstand. Pain he welcomed. Pain was nothing to a Master of Dragons, the greatest that had ever lived. Pressure from twenty-

thousand leagues of ocean bearing down on him was a pain that crushed bones, but his blood ran strong and hot in his veins. The Old Blood, Dragonsblood of the ancient land. He had planned for pain.

He had not planned for fear.

The darkness around him was absolute, like a whale had swallowed him whole to a place not even shadows dared tread. There was no light here, no shadows, just the inky blackness of nothingness, cold and heavy and endless. Lost at sea, sunken to the darkest depths of the tidal abyss, Lance the Dragonmaster clutched his deadened fingers around the only thing keeping him alive in this hell. The Silver Wing pulsed—not with heat or light, but with something much closer to the soul, if you believe in that kind of thing. Lance believed.

He believed he was going the right way, tumbling over himself. He believed there was a light down here, smothered to nothing in the stygian expanse. He believed the voices in his head, memories revitalized by the nightmares that gained life and followed him down here, were just that—voices in his head. Not real. The hand around his neck.

"*You're not even worth killing."*

Voices in his head.

"*You're not worth it."*

Not real.

That's not a hand on his neck, it's the fear. And it's very real. And those aren't memories, they're his own delusions. Memory is a terrible thing, showing us what we want to see and making it real. Because we don't always want to remember the good things, and we don't ever remember reality just as it was. Not the details. Not the smell of burning fat and skin, acrid and stinging on the back of his throat. Not the sound of his father, a grown man and sworn protector of the Elder, squealing and squirming like a stuck pig and begging for mercy. Not even the sight of the rusted pike, driven in through his father's stomach. But he does remember the feeling, when that rusty pipe burst out the other end of his father. Like a flower blooming, red and radiant, as beautiful as it was ghastly, though most beautiful things are, when you take the time to look at them. *Really* look at them. Beauty is an aberration, noticeable because of its otherness. Horrifying.

He remembers the fear that he'll be next, until that faceless, nameless voice tells him again, *"You're not worth it."*

He should have been relieved, but to be spared was to be condemned. Condemned to bear his father's name, a coward's name. Condemned to be a survivor, haunted, pitied, a freakshow for others to gawk at from a safe distance. *Look, there he is, the boy they left behind.* The one that wasn't even worth killing. Vermin.

The waves beat him ceaselessly in the darkness, head over heels until it no longer mattered which way was up or down, the darkness was the same in all directions. Groaning, like wood whining, a mast snapping under a storm's gales, the beginning of inevitable doom.

There was no way of knowing whether the force field the Silver Wing had generated as soon as he hit the frothing waves was intact, whether it was succumbing to the pressure and darkness as he slowly was. But he could still breathe, could still hear his heart thundering like the storm brewing at the surface far above. Or below? Up and down, it was all the same, black monotony down here where even the sun dared not venture. There was nothing here, not even death.

But there was him. And there was the power he sought. Lance would not give up until it was his. He'd come too far now.

Something scraped against his knee, and it took all his willpower not to gag on his fright. His mind was focused, but his body screamed for relief, anything to escape this dark ocean, to reach out his hand and clutch another, to be pulled ashore.

Another bump, and something that felt like wind. But it wasn't wind, it was water. He was thousands of leagues deep in darkness, submerged in every sense of the word.

Groaning, like wind filling white sails, a ship clinging to the tides to stay afloat. He held the Silver Wing as if it were the heart of his lover, tenderly and full of longing. He couldn't stay here. He couldn't sleep here, couldn't let the hand crush his neck to nothing, lull him into darkness.

Wake up.

He reached for something, the Silver Wing in hand, as the winds that weren't winds picked up speed and fury, beat him this way and that.

Wake up, you can't sleep here.

His father, bleating like a child and begging, begging.

"*You're not worth it.*"

Two lanterns, aglow and so bright after so much darkness, pulsing as they tested the waters. He swam toward them as best he could.

Wake up, damnit!

The lanterns exploded, flood his senses with eerie light, and he reached for them, the bent Silver Wing crushed between his bloodless fingers. And the voice in his head, again:

"*You're not worth it.*"

Lance the Dragonmaster, weighed down under pulverizing water pressure and drifting in darkness so bleak it was beyond good and evil and whatever else men had dreamed up to explain what they did not understand, stared the dead lights down and swallowed the fear that would not conquer him anymore, not here and not ever again.

"I said, *wake up*!" he bellowed.

His voice echoed in a far-off place, disembodied and smothered under the ocean above, but it reached the slumbering beast all the same. The inky water churned as he floated ever closer to the two expanding lights, and what little breath remained to him was lost to the eddying seas. The pain he had prepared for hit him now, twenty-thousand leagues' worth, and his body was helpless against it.

But his mind remained focused.

The darkness screamed all around him as the waters rushed to meet him, the Silver Wing's protective barrier no longer effective, and an enormous whirlpool jettisoned him away. Just away, up or down, who knew? Until the darkness was gone and the low, afternoon sun seared his skin after so long in the cold. The whirlpool carried him high, higher than high, over the ocean's surface, glittering in the setting sunlight, pinks and purples and oranges. Salt stung his eyes and burned his throat, and yet he stretched his parched lips and smiled as he flew, the whirlpool whipping ever faster underfoot.

He chanced a look down, too far for the eyes to see, but the black ocean floor loomed far below, and two lanterns, blinking and roused after a thousand years in slumber, slowly flickered to life and grew larger.

Two Dragonair appeared under each of Lance's arms and guided him to safety back to the shores of the deserted Shamouti Island. He'd left them here to keep watch, for him or for whoever was coming—there was always someone coming.

His legs gave out from under him and his joints screamed in pain from the extreme cold and pressure, but he held his head up as the two Dragonair bore his weight, singing their mournful song as they looked on. The whirlpool, an inverted water spout, grew as it whipped about faster and faster. Thirty feet, fifty, eighty feet across, and still growing taller and wider as it filled the rocky, crescent bay. Gasping for breath, the Silver Wing crushed and bent out of shape in his right hand, Lance stared in awe and rapture at the sight.

"I'm the only one who's worth it," he said.

A roar, if it could even be called as much, echoed up from the depths and pierced sea and sky. The clouds roiled, blotting out the sun, and the waves churned mightily. It struck a chord of fear deep in Lance's heart, but he relished it. If he was afraid, just think of what the others would feel.

In the distance, three solitary islands stood at equidistant points a few miles off Shamouti's coast. Fire, Ice, and Lightning Islands rose like a wall around the Shamouti crescent. But the waves grew higher, and the winds whipped fiercer, and soon those pathetic rocks would sink beneath the sea as Lance once had, lost to darkness.

Another roar from within the sentient whirlpool, stronger this time. It wouldn't be long now.

"Lugia," Lance said, righting himself through the ache in his limbs and stretching it out of his muscles. He could feel his blood dancing in his veins, invigorated despite the suffering he'd just subjected himself to. This was where he belonged.

"It's time."

He would show the world he was worth it and more, if they lived long enough to see it.

28. Shamouti Island, Part 2

Triumvirate, chapter 28: Shamouti Island, Part 2
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

The storm brewing over Shamouti Island was an ominous sign if Ivy ever saw one. Fire, Ice, and Lightning Islands were barely visible through the sea spray, surging waves, and dark clouds. Crobat shook under her saddle, and she reached out to pat its head, keeping low so the furious winds wouldn't blow her off. The rains hadn't started yet, but she figured it was just a matter of time.

And time, as it appeared from the shit they were flying towards, was not on their side.

"We have to land!" Gary shouted as he maneuvered Aerodactyl as close to Crobat as safely possible.

She barely heard him over the winds, but got the message when he pointed to the nearest stretch of land: Ice Island. She signaled an okay to him and waved to Ash, who was flying Charizard on her other side. The pseudo-Dragon was a sight to scare even her cloaked in Mismagius's pale Ghost fire, a monstrous wraith sent from hell.

"Ash! We're landing!" she shouted as best she could over the winds.

Faster than the others, Crobat swooped low toward Ice Island. Ivy peered over the side of its head past thick wings that were nothing but a blur as they beat faster than the eye could see. Crobat maintained a safe altitude, but below the churning waves had begun to swirl together into singular, amorphous masses—whirlpools, hundreds of them, forming and collapsing and forming again, unstable.

Shit.

She repeated the curse aloud when Ice Island loomed just ahead and she got a better look at it. Surrounded in thick fog, the island was not blacked out by the inclement weather, but because it was naturally so. And 'island' was putting it nicely. The black sheen, the frigid fog, the angular cuts in the rock face too clean to be rock—Ice Island was just that, an island covered in ice.

Crobat shrieked as Ivy pushed it to land, and she had to be tug on the saddle horn to make her point. Stretches of rock, black as pitch, made up the bulk of the island and gave the ice its dark sheen. A black

iceberg stranded at sea, Ice Island was perhaps even less hospitable than the storm brewing just beyond. In the distance, Ivy could make out the tall volcano that topped Fire Island and the rocky ruins, long abandoned, over Lightning Island beyond that. Neither looked any more welcoming.

Charizard, wary of the ice, spat out a Flamethrower to melt a landing strip for itself, but the ice didn't melt. It didn't even sweat. Spooky, and something told Ivy it wasn't the spookiest thing she would see today.

Aerodactyl squawked angrily at having to land on the frozen ground, and everyone dismounted and huddled around.

"Shit, did you guys see that?" Ash said. "Charizard's Flamethrower didn't even scratch the ice."

"I'll take that as confirmation that we're in the right place," Gary said grimly.

Lily wasn't paying attention, and Ivy followed her gaze to the heart of the storm to the south—Shamouti Island.

"So, what's the plan?" Ivy said, not liking the shorter girl's look.

They were all armed and armored to the gills, Pokéballs and knives and Lily's crossbow she'd pilfered a while back during the siege of Saffron strapped to her back. But the armor wasn't doing much for everyone's collective shivering. Only Ivy seemed resistant to the cold, more so than the others, which wasn't saying much.

"We gotta get those birds," Ash said. "What'd Blaine tell you guys about them?"

"That they're here on the islands, but that we'd have to look for them. He wasn't all that specific..."

Ivy crossed her arms. "Gee, what a helpful guy."

"Okay, it's okay," Ash said. "We can figure this out. They gotta be here, right?" He paused, thinking. "The Silver Wing's s'posed to wake up Lugia. So...maybe the other three're also sleeping or something?"

At the mention of Lugia, Lily tore her eyes from the gathering storm. "You have to wake them up."

Ivy narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean, 'you'? You're coming, too."

Lily shook her head. "No, I'm not. I'm going after Lance."

"Absolutely not," Gary said. "We do this together. We can't hope to stand up to Lugia without the birds. It's our only lead, so we have to try."

"So let's assume it all works out," Lily said, turning on Gary. "Let's say you wake up the birds, somehow get them to cooperate, and face Lugia. You still have one problem: Lance himself."

"There's three birds and only one Lance," Ivy argued. "I'm no genius, but I'm pretty sure I got that math right."

Lily's expression contorted in a mix of anger and fear and something else that didn't look quite right on her. "Will you guys just listen to me? The only reason we're even here is 'cause of *him*." She jabbed a gloved finger at the roiling storm in the distance. "*He's* the one doing this. And he has to be stopped. If you underestimate him or ignore him, we're all gonna die."

"We're not ignoring him," Gary tried to reason with her. "But we've got a better chance at this if we all work together. That's all we're saying."

"And I'm saying you're not considering the real threat here."

Ever since their last night on Cinnabar, Lily had been on edge and not herself, and she refused to share why. It pissed Ivy off. What did she think, that she could sweep in and do everything herself? There was strength in numbers, and martyrdom was a coward's excuse. Most of all, it hurt that Lily hadn't trusted her enough to share what was bothering her. Ivy could take a few guesses, but it wasn't the point. But she wasn't about to let her best friend fall on her own sword.

"Cut it out, Lily," she snapped. "If you think for one second we're letting you wander in there alone for *any* reason, you're outta your goddamned mind. What is this, some Titan thing? Is that what Clair said to you? That you have to do this by yourself?"

Lily's face flushed with anger. "Shut up! You don't know anything about it!"

"Yeah, because you won't *tell* me!"

Ash's hands on each of the girls' shoulders shut them up quick. His touch was colder than the air around them, and his eyes had taken on the violet cloak that turned him into something else. Something that could see through Ivy like no one else did.

"That's enough," he said, softly but with enough force to mean it.

Lily slipped away and averted her eyes back to the storm. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears and her jaw was set so hard her teeth might crack. Through the haze of anger and hurt, Ivy took a good look at her. Lily was a cute girl, she'd always thought so, but in her stubborn anger and inattention, she wasn't just cute anymore. There was a cut to her jaw, sharp at this angle that wasn't readily visible looking at the girl head on as she smiled like she usually did. The cold fog painted ice crystals on her cheeks, making them shine, almost scaly. Feeling Ivy's stare, Lily turned around again and met it with a glare of her own.

Eyes like liquid amber, a little too narrow at the sides when she squinted in anger. Animalistic. Familiar.

"*You look good in green, kid."*

"I don't want to fight," Lily said, trying to calm her anger and breathe.

Incisors just a little too long to miss.

"I'm sorry," she went on, the anger evaporating from her voice and expression, replaced with a hollowness that belied sleepless nights and deep-seated terror. "But I need you to trust me. I have to face him, if only to buy you some time. I have to do this, Ivy. Just like you had to face Karen."

Shame tore at Ivy's throat, and it hurt to swallow. "I'm sorry. But you're scaring me, and I don't scare easy. I'm afraid if you go in there alone..."

Lily took her hands in hers, and suddenly the crooked details melted away. Her best friend, trying to smile, bright like the sun that wasn't shining now.

Not like Lance.

"I'm not alone, not really." Lily glanced at Ash, and something unsaid passed between them. "None of us are. But I'm going, I need to face him." She paused and her eyes unfocused. "I want to."

A low roar, or something like it, bubbled up from the depths of the sea in the distance and all around, as if the sea itself had seen them coming and was warning them off. There was something sad about it, something primal that touched a chord in Ivy's heart, strummed the fear she'd gotten so good at strangling. This was real, and it was happening, and right now Lily was the only one facing it head on.

"Guess I'm no match for a bona-fide genius," Ivy said, forcing a laugh. "God, is this what it's like? Being so afraid that it feels like you're helpless? I almost forgot at the rate we've been going."

"Better remember quick before you face Articuno," Gary said. "We all should."

The four of them stood in a circle, silently absorbing these last moments when they would stand together. Because no amount of pretty words, no amount of conviction or uttered mantras could change the truth: they were each in this alone. Alone to face forces of nature unlike anything they had ever seen, to conquer an impossible legend. Alone together.

"Hey," Ash said, "we can do this. We beat the Elite Four, so how hard can this be?"

His attempt to lighten the mood fell flat, but Ivy suspected she wasn't alone in appreciating the sentiment.

"I'm still waiting on the 'how'," Ivy said.

"Well, that's easy." Ash selected a ball from his belt and held it out. "I can't think of a better time to test these babies out."

The Master Ball's golden 'M' shimmered in the mist. Such a small thing, but the pinnacle of human technology. Was mankind's best a match for nature's best? Ivy fished out her own Master Ball and Gary did the same.

"Ash is right," Gary said. "It's worth a shot. I just hope it works."

"And if it doesn't?" Ivy said.

"If it doesn't, you already died once," Ash said, all traces of humor gone. "Don't do it again."

Lily looked between the three of them, the youngest and smallest of their group, but she wasn't backing down.

"*I don't know what a Titan can do,*" Gary had pondered aloud back when they learned the truth about Lily in Saffron.

Pocketing the Master Ball once more, Ivy selected another Pokéball from her belt and held it out to Lily. "I want you to take Tyranitar."

Lily frowned. "What? Why? He's your best Pokémon. You're gonna need him."

Ivy shook her head. "What am I gonna do, strap him to Articuno's back and hope for the best? Yeah, right. Take it."

She pushed the Pokéball into Lily's hands before the shorter girl could protest.

"But I can't—"

"Just stop arguing and take it already. I can't stop you from facing Lance, but I sure as hell can make sure you've got the best chance to light a fire under his ass."

Lily turned Tyranitar's Pokéball over in her hands, expression numb. "Tyranitar's a descendant of the old Dragons. I could probably convince it to fight with me..."

Ivy put a hand on her shoulder. Those big eyes, full of wonderment and curiosity and a little fear like the day they first met, looked up at her in question.

There you are.

"Tyranitar knows you. He'll fight with you because of that, Titan or no." She paused before adding, "Consider him a part of me with you on the ground out there."

Lily teared up and held the Pokéball close to her chest. "Thanks, Ivy."

In the distance, the storm was getting steadily worse. The clouds and sea spray were so thick that Shamouti was impossible to make out, but the longer Ivy looked through the gloom, the more she thought she could make out a shape writhing in the center of it all. A huge vortex, but it faded in and out of the fog, impossible to make out even to her keen eyes.

"We better get a move on," Gary said, following Ivy's gaze to the storm's heart. "I get the feeling we're a little late to the party."

Ivy nodded. "Go. I'll manage here on my own."

Gary reached for her hand, a subtle gesture, but Lily noticed and nodded to Ash to give them some space.

"I'd ask if you'll be okay, but that's a stupid question," Gary said once they had a little privacy.

Ivy smirked. "I've trained you well, I see."

They stood together for a moment, studying each other, maybe for the last time. Gary broke the silence with a shaky breath.

"Ivy..."

She leaned into him and kissed him gently. There was goodbye in that kiss, but not for long. "Just promise me one thing."

"Anything."

"Try not to let that head of yours get in the way. Just...do what comes naturally. This place, being here... I can feel it in the air, in the stone. There's something here, something old, and I don't think we're meant to understand it. But I think we're meant to find it."

He said nothing, and the vicious wind was making him shake like a leaf. But those luminous, green eyes that had captivated her from the moment she saw them studied her carefully.

"I'll try."

"Good. Now get going. See you...up there."

They both looked up at the grey sky ahead. The afternoon sunlight pierced the horizon like searching fingers grasping at something to hang onto.

"Stay alive," he said gruffly.

With a final squeeze of her hand, Gary turned his back and headed for Aerodactyl, who was about ready to have an aneurysm from the cold. Lily was already saddled in, Tyranitar's Pokéball at her belt, and Ash was patting Charizard, eager to get off this iceberg of an island. They waved and took off in a flurry, leaving Ivy behind. She had recalled Crobat to spare it the cold, and now stood alone on a frozen wasteland.

Rubbing her hands for warmth and for once thankful for her long hair that was heavy against her neck, she began to hike around the island.

Gotta be something here, a cave or something.

It was not easy trekking. In between the frozen, black rock coursed veins of ice equally as black. Icicles and spikes protruded from the jagged rock, sometimes in sheets cut at such harsh angles that Ivy could imagine weaknesses in the ice causing huge chunks to slough off into the sea. Her boots had traction, but she moved slowly, wary of the slippery, uneven surface.

Umbreon would have been a great help right about now, she thought as a wave of despair passed through her. It was sure-footed and reliable, always knew where to step so it wouldn't be caught in a trap —

"Ahh!"

Ivy's shrill scream was drowned out by the rushing, crashing chunks of rock and ice that gave out below her, and she free-fell through a huge crag. Tumbling, something heavy and cold crashed down onto her chest and knocked the wind out of her, cutting off her scream and inundating her with crushing pain. She lifted her armored arms to protect her head and face and tried to curl into a ball, but something hard hit her side and all of a sudden she wasn't falling anymore, but sliding.

Glimpses of the hole she'd fallen into rushed past her as she slid down and down through a chute of ice, heavy chunks of ice and rock toppling along beside her and smacking her about like a punching bag. Pain erupted in her back, her hips, her chest and shoulders, and a narrow turn slammed her head against the wall of the chute, making her see stars.

Then falling. She didn't even have the breath to scream this time before she hit the uneven, frozen ground hard on her side. Heaving, she cried out as the ache came alive in her side, her hips, her spinning head. Her fingers slipped on the ground, icy, but the cold was the least of her worries at the moment.

Taking a moment to catch her breath and steady her nerves, Ivy managed to get herself into a sitting position and began checking her injuries. Some poking and prodding revealed no major damage, nothing broken thanks to her sturdy armor. But her head still swam from the bump it took, and she rubbed her temples to ease the ache.

"Gonna feel that in the morning," she grumbled.

Her breath misted and drew ice crystals over her face, but she barely felt the cold. Even if she had a concussion, there was no danger of falling asleep down here.

Down here, it was dead.

She looked around and shivered. Not out of cold, but out of fear. There was something here, as she'd confided to Gary, and it ruled this place, lived in the very air and ice and stone. It wasn't creeping up her spine or clenching her heart. There was no need. It simply lay in wait here, patient, in the shadows buried in the ice. And it was familiar.

Struggling to her feet, Ivy looked around. She was still in the chute, and when she looked up she could just barely make out the light that filtered from the crevasse she had opened up and fallen through. Veins of ice let in light through the stone, diffused and greyish-blue, but she didn't need it to see.

Ivy put a hand on the wall to steady her balance, and started walking the only direction she could: down.

When Aerodactyl and Charizard touched down on Fire Island, Gary had an extremely unwelcome feeling of déjà vu staring up at the volcano's gaping maw.

More lava. Great.

One thing that piqued his scientist's curiosity was the severe change in temperature between here and Ice Island, where they'd left Ivy. The ground was warm to the touch, almost uncomfortably so. The volcano appeared dormant, no signs of smoke or ash or any seismic activity. Aerodactyl and Charizard didn't exhibit any signs of unease or confusion. But the skeptic in Gary told him those reassurances would mean squat the minute he started hiking to the heart of the volcano.

Because where else would you expect to find Moltres, the great Fire Bird of legend?

He had half a mind to go back for Ivy. There was no way they could do this alone. But Lily was already unstrapping him from the saddle and offering a hand down.

"Hey man, I didn't see any way into the volcano when we were flying,"

Ash said. "I think you gotta go in through the top."

Gary slipped off Aerodactyl and patted the grey reptile, savoring the contact and the surge of safety he felt just being near it. "Yeah, I figured as much."

"Well, cheer up. At least you're not stranded on a giant iceberg in the freezing cold and dark like Ivy."

Gary shot him a withering look. "Yeah, Ash, that *really* cheers me up."

"Ivy'll be fine," Lily said. "She's at her best in the cold and the dark by herself."

Gary let that slide. He supposed no one else would have been able to survive whatever horrors and trials awaited Ivy on Ice Island.

"Gary," Ash said.

"Yeah?"

He held out his hand. "Remember what I told you back on Cinnabar. I meant it."

Gary palmed his Master Ball and eyed Ash's offered hand.

"*You're just Gary, my best friend. And I believe in you."*

"Guess this is goodbye." He glanced at Lily. "For now."

"For now," she repeated. "But maybe don't take your time in there."

"Believe me, I won't."

He looked at Ash's hand again and clapped his in it. They stood close together in a half embrace.

"Be careful in there," Ash said.

Gary's face twisted into the taunting smirk he had perfected years ago, the one he knew made Ash's blood boil. "Don't worry. I'll beat you to Shamouti and get the first punch at Lugia for you."

Ash's eyes flared with the age-old annoyance he'd always harbored at Gary's arrogant streak. But his grin said otherwise. "You're on. First one to Shamouti."

Gary pocketed his Master Ball once more and backed away. He looked between Ash and Lily, then back at Aerodactyl, then at Lily again.

"I'm only gonna say this once, so listen up." He tossed Lily Aerodactyl's Pokéball, and she caught it on instinct. "You're the smartest person I've ever met, better than my Gramps and better than me. If you can figure out how to revive Lugia, then I believe you can figure out how to beat Lance."

Lily gaped at Gary, speechless as her hands trembled with Aerodactyl's empty Pokéball.

"He's the Champion for a reason. It's not just about being the strongest. You know that by now, maybe better than the rest of us. So do what you're best at: be smart. And take care of Rocky while I'm gone."

Lily nodded vigorously, fighting hard not to cry. "I will," she said, her voice cracking.

Gary nodded stiffly and turned back to Aerodactyl. He ran a hand over the beast's horned head, earning a pleasant rumble in return. Aerodactyl nudged him with its enormous snout. "See you soon."

Ash and Pikachu returned to Charizard, while Lily accepted a leg up from Gary to settle into the front seat of Aerodactyl's saddle, her Pikachu in her lap.

"Go," Gary said. "There's no time to waste."

"Let's go, Rocky," Lily said, gently patting Aerodactyl.

The ancient Pokémon hurled itself into the air, the whipping winds made worse under its mighty wings, and Charizard followed suit. Gary shielded his eyes and crouched to avoid getting knocked over by the sheer force of the gales pushing him this way and that. He watched them as they soared toward Lightning Island several miles out, and breathed.

"Here goes nothing," he said to himself.

Looking up at the mouth of the volcano, he quickly calculated the time and energy he would waste trying to hike up it on his own and decided it wasn't worth it. Reaching for two Pokéballs, he released Arcanine and Alakazam, both of whom spooked and crouched at their sudden appearance in a hostile environment. Alakazam shielded its

inflated head with its emaciated arms, but it accomplished little and its long mustachios flapped chaotically. Arcanine pawed the ground and growled.

Gary glanced at Alakazam, their mental link communicating everything that had happened and what was left yet to do. In seconds, the Psychic brought Arcanine up to speed, and the orange canine was kneeling for the two of them to climb onto its back. Once settled, Gary in front and Alakazam in back awkwardly clutching Gary's waist with its three-fingered hands, Gary tapped Arcanine's sides.

"Stay alert," he warned the canine.

But Arcanine was sure-footed and swift, making leaps and bounds toward the mouth of the volcano in record time. Alakazam could only hold on as the winds buffeted it callously. In a matter of minutes, Arcanine had scaled the squat volcano and peered over the edge. Someone, perhaps the ancient peoples that had once summoned the legendary birds to help them defeat Lugia a thousand years ago, had carved steps into the volcano's side, wide enough for four men to stand shoulder to shoulder. They wound down and around the volcano's trunk, disappearing into darkness far below.

"Fantastic," Gary grumbled, feeling anything but.

Arcanine seemed to be in higher spirits and yipped. Gary scratched the canine's thick, golden mane and bade it continue. Alakazam pulsed with trepidation behind Gary, but he had to ignore the Psychic's warning and push forward. Arcanine made good time, and steadily the trio descended deeper into the dark chasm.

Despite the situation, Gary had to marvel at the stonemasons' work on the volcano. The steps were smooth and weathered from years subjected to the elements, but if they lasted this long, maybe that meant the volcano was truly dormant. Carvings in the stone walls captured his attention, intermittent at first, but more frequent and extravagant the deeper he descended. They depicted men fighting with crude weapons, spears and daggers and the like. Pokémon fought alongside them, some he recognized and others that must have died out long ago. Lily would have a field day if she saw these, he thought wistfully.

More carvings deeper in the volcano depicted men and women kneeled in prayer, dancing, or just staring back at him with hollow eyes. The one constant he saw among all the pictograms was fire.

They fought with it, worshipped it, danced about it, and fled from its fury. Men burned, fallen to their knees, while women and children and the Pokémon that protected them attempted to flee and defend themselves from it. The fire was alive, a huge mass with a mind of its own awakened before its time, or maybe for the wrong reasons, or maybe just because that's what monsters do. Gary could not hope to know. But he saw what it did.

Death, destruction, suffering. Wrath. A sharp contrast to the fire's giving light and warmth in the earlier pictograms he'd passed.

A warning, he thought.

Alakazam agreed.

"Fire's a double-edged sword. Abuse it, and you'll get burned."

He would have laughed at the cliché if he wasn't facing down what was realistically the last hour of his life.

But wielded wisely, fire is also the essence of life.

Arcanine yipped, panting happily, as if it had heard his thought and readily agreed. At least one of them was feeling positive about this little expedition.

So lost in thought and enamored of the evidence of an ancient civilization's preserved wisdom, Gary didn't notice right away the gradually rising temperatures as he descended—or the soft glow that grew stronger far below. The winds howled above, melancholy and lost, more of a shriek than a whistle, and echoed down the trunk of the volcano, chasing him.

Arcanine was the first to sense what awaited them ahead with a growl. The stairs dropped out a short ways ahead, crumbled to nothing, but Arcanine approached the edge and peered over. Then the heat hit Gary like a wet towel to the face.

A hundred feet below, glowing dimly but emitting enough heat to throw Gary into a profuse sweat just looming over the edge, was a vast pool of magma crusted black and charred over from years of dormancy. Shimmering heat rose from cracks in the crust and glowed bright orange, where far below the lava still bubbled.

"The hell...?"

Dormant volcanoes should not have any lava visible in their cores at all. Then again, this was no ordinary volcano. Was it possible that all these centuries, the volcano was sitting here in such a precarious state of instability? And if so, what was keeping it that way?

He glanced at the wall again, where the pictograms were half melted into nothing, wiped away by whatever had destroyed the steps. The heat made him sleepy, sticky, and yet the air down here was crisp, almost too much so. He got the feeling that a single spark of static electricity could ignite a fire in here the likes of which he had never seen and would never live to tell about.

Alakazam buzzed behind him all of a sudden, and Gary let it direct his vision to a spot deeper in the heart of the volcano.

An altar of some sort, carved directly into the opposite wall of the volcano. Too far to make the jump on Arcanine. His first thought was to simply Teleport, but Alakazam immediately recoiled at the thought. The heat was too much for the lanky Pokémon. Something about this place, more than the heat and gloom, but something in the air, oversaturated to the point that it was like breathing was too refreshing. Was it possible to feel too alive?

"This is a test," Gary wondered aloud. "Of course it's a test."

The pictograms, the warnings they depicted, the power of fire for those who used it wisely. Of course there would be a test. Swallowing —sometimes he *really* hated being right—he looked down at the crusted lava below.

"Arcanine, jump *very* carefully."

He would have to reach the altar the old fashioned way. Arcanine crouched low on its haunches and leaped into the air.

The ruins of Lightning Island were staggeringly beautiful, even after thousands of years' worth of weathering and decay. From above, past the whistling winds, Ash gazed down in awe at broken cathedrals, a crumbling colosseum, pillars that once supported what he imagined were colorful frescoes depicting epic battles or scenes from fairy tales. Unlike the desolate Ice and Fire Islands, Lightning Island had once been a place for pilgrims to wander the terraced streets, find solace in prayer and worship, and perhaps witness a miracle. It was a place to be reborn.

He landed Charizard in the center of a ruined pantheon, its domed roof long since crumbled to rubble upon the white marble floor. The great lizard snarled, perhaps sensing something in the air, something old and powerful but not forgotten, not to those who listened. Ash had a sense of what Ivy had been talking about, something in the air, this place... It was alive, and yet death haunted the halls of this abandoned necropolis. He was sure he and Lily were the first people to set foot here in a thousand years, at least.

"Wow," Lily said as she dismounted and looked around. "This is incredible."

Waves crashed against the steep, white cliffs with reckless abandon, hungry to swallow them and maybe not too far from their goal as the storm over Shamouti continued to build. At the acropolis, the highest point of the island, stood a cracked patheon, columned and high-ceilinged. There, Ash knew in his gut, was where he would have to look for the legendary Thunder Bird, Zapdos.

"Here, let's get their saddles off," Ash said.

Charizard snarled, but when Ash loosened the saddle around its middle, it relaxed a little and decided not to bite his head off. Gengar and Mismagius materialized over his shoulders, and Pikachu jumped to the ground, ears alert and cheeks sparking as it sniffed the air.

"Ouch!" Lily tugged at one of the buckles securing Aerodactyl's saddle in place, but yanked her hand away and shook out her hand. "I just got shocked. Crazy static electricity."

Her Pikachu squeaked and huddled next to Ash's Pikachu, nervous.

"Then I guess we're in the right place, huh?" Ash said with a smile.

Alone, Ash approached her but stopped just short of touching her. It was new, raw, and they had no time. The storm was already breaking.

"I...guess you better hurry if you wanna beat Gary to Shamouti," Lily said. "But I guess I'll beat you both." She tried to smile, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"Hey, look at me." Ash took her face in his hands and angled it up. "You can do this. You're gonna be okay, and when I get there riding a freakin' Zapdos, you can rest easy."

"Ash, I..."

He watched her, the turmoil in her amber eyes, the tears she'd bravely held back—all of it came crashing down. She could hold it in for Gary and Ivy, but not for him. Not anymore. He pulled her into a fierce embrace while their Pikachu looked on.

"I'm so afraid," she confided. "I'm so afraid."

"That's okay, it's okay to be afraid," he whispered into her hair. "We're all afraid. You know what? I bet even Lance is afraid of something. It's human to feel fear."

She pulled back and searched his eyes. "But that's just it. Lance, he... He's not..." She swallowed.

"What's wrong?"

"Clair told me... Told me a secret about about him. About us, our kind. Titans... We're not human, not like the rest of you. We're Dragonsblood, and his is, like, a zillion times stronger than mine."

Ash stared at her, trying to follow.

"I don't know anything, not like he does. And he can, like, control things... And she said I was like a vodka soda, and I don't even know what that means? I don't even like vodka sodas. Is that a bad thing? It has to be bad, right? I mean, this was Clair and she's scary and she definitely did *not* like me—"

Ash silenced her with a kiss and tried not to laugh. She felt his smile and, despite her inner turmoil, reciprocated it. He drew it out of her, that smile he admired so much, the one that could lift his spirits no matter how far they had fallen, and kissed her hard. Her tears fell on his cheeks, between their lips, but he was happy to take them.

Out of breath and caught off guard, Lily stared up at him in question. He touched their foreheads and blocked out the winds as best he could. It was easy with her. Even falling from a forty-story building was just white noise when he was looking at her.

"I'm not as smart as Gary, and I'm nowhere near as cool as Ivy, but I think I know you pretty well by now, and I really hope you'll listen when I tell you this."

She waited, eyes wide.

"I never cared that you were a Titan or whatever. None of that

matters, I don't give a shit what Clair or anybody else says. You're you, and you're smart and you're strong. I know you can do this 'cause I can see it in you. You're one of us. The rest just doesn't matter."

He pressed an Ultra Ball into her hand and closed his fingers around hers.

"Charizard's a stubborn ass, but he'll listen to you. Hell, he likes you better than me, anyway. So, like Ivy said, think of Charizard as a part of me with you out there. Least till *I* get there!"

He flashed her a bright smile and wiped her tears with his thumb.

"Ash, I'm... No, that's not right. I wanna say it right." She paused to collect herself and shook her head. "You asked me what I want."

"Yeah?"

"I want to be believed in, really believed in. I know I'm not a fighter like Ivy or a tactician like Gary, and I could never be like you. But I still... I wanna do this."

She steeled herself and grinned fiercely.

"So go ahead and take your time. I'm gonna take care of Lance, Titan on Titan. I swear I won't let you guys down."

Ash laughed. "There she is. That's the girl I fell for."

She blushed prettily but didn't try to hide it. Instead, she bent down and scooped up her Pikachu. "I want you to take ChuChu with you for now. You're going after some super Electric Pokémon, so I think she could help."

Ash blinked. "Oh, really? Thanks! ChuChu'll be a big help, I'm sure of it."

The two Pikachu gathered at Ash's feet and pawed at his legs. Lily pulled back, her hand in his and tugging until their fingers could no longer hold on. Charizard and Aerodactyl, bareback, watched her with keen eyes, for once their inherent resentment for one another taking a back seat.

Wow, Ash thought to himself. *Whatever Clair said, she's totally wrong about Lily.*

"Be quick, okay?" Lily said as she climbed atop Aerodactyl's back and

tried to find a comfortable groove to sit in.

"You won't even miss me," Ash said.

She smiled a little. "Sure I will."

And with that, Aerodactyl and Charizard launched into the air once more, this time on a course for the maelstrom over Shamouti. Ash, the two Pikachu, Gengar, and Mismagius watched them go.

"Well, guys?" Ash said. "Let's find this bird everyone's talkin' about and see if we can't knock some sense into it."

He tossed his Master Ball between his hands, a little game.

"Just a game," he mused.

Gengar grinned at the mention of a game, and Mismagius looked intrigued. *How fun.*

"Let's have a little fun, then. Pika, ChuChu, lead the way."

The two rodents took off at a healthy scamper and scuttled up the broken steps toward the acropolis. Ash followed, his spectral cloak allowing him to jump great distances and keep up with the speeding rodents. He glanced at the ruined architecture as he ascended. Even with no knowledge of the art or industry, his heart was moved by the clear skill and craftsmanship that had gone into these structures once upon a time. Someone had cared enough to construct a small village sturdy enough to withstand the tests of time and the elements. That meant something, even if he didn't fully understand it.

The acropolis loomed ahead, and Ash and his Pokémon made good time in reaching it. The skies above roiled, black with the threat of a storm. Thunder rumbled, almost continuous in its roar, or was that the ocean? Lightning, brilliant and bold, flashed in sheets above. He coughed and had to slow down, suddenly out of breath and lightheaded.

Ozone, he realized.

A shit ton of it.

He remembered this feeling from when he fought Surge so long ago, the helplessness that seemed to grow from inside like a weed, insidious. Broken altars lined the stairs as he approached the

acropolis, marble pedestals with copper bowls on top filled with old rain water. They were rusted green from exposure and oxidization.

Copper, that's important. Why's it important...?

Not for the first time, he wished he could remember random information as well as Gary could. But as it turned out, he didn't need to remember. Inspiration, as usual, was on his side. ChuChu leaped over a small crag in the steps, her cheeks puffed out and sparking, and all of a sudden one of the copper bowls began to crackle with electricity. Ash watched as a thin lightning bolt jumped in between ChuChu and the bowl and swirled around the copper, like a marble in a funnel racing for the bottom. It was gone in a flash, and the acrid smell of ozone lingered in its wake.

"Duh, copper conducts electricity!" Ash announced, feeling accomplished.

But if this island was Zapdos's home, why the hell would anyone bring copper here? Ash got his answer as he reached the acropolis and wandered past the thick, marble columns that walled it off from the rest of the small city below. A wide, dark cave opened up at the back of the structure, and beyond it...

"...Oh, fuck."

Copper rods embedded into the ground, tall as two men standing on their shoulders, sparked with golden electricity. Lightning rods, like the ones he'd faced in Surge's Gym. Except there were hundreds here. And they didn't just extend up from the ground—they also hung from the ceiling.

And all of them were live.

Mismagius hovered at Ash's left shoulder, its worry plain to detect as it eyed the many lightning rods. Gengar, however, grinned wider. The game just got a hell of a lot more interesting.

"How the hell am I s'posed to get through this?"

Even with his Aura cloak, he couldn't hope to scale the vast cavern without getting fried to a pulp. There were just too many lightning rods, and he could only jump so far in a single bound. No, he would have to do this the old fashioned way, the tried and true method. He glanced down at the two Pikachu.

"Well Pika? ChuChu? Looks like you two're gonna hafta get us through here the hard way. My money's on Zapdos bein' at the other end of this minefield. Think you can redirect all the lightning in here?"

The two Pikachu sparked in anticipation, their energies fired up and raring to go. Maybe it was the air in here, toxic to a human but ambrosia to an Electric-type Pokémon. Ash tried to ignore the burn in his throat that threatened to clamp it up. The Ghosts helped, a little.

"Just a game," he said as much to himself as to his Pokémon. "We're gonna play a fun game of chase."

Flanked by the two Pikachu and swathed in phantasmal shadows, Ash stepped into the minefield.

The winds were not kind to Lily as she held onto Aerodactyl for dear life. Charizard soared just to the right, its nostrils leaking black smog. The tumultuous sea below raged with a life of its own, insatiable, and swirled with the beginnings of numerous whirlpools. They cannibalized each other, formed and collapsed and formed again, but Lily took this as a bad sign. All that power, and nowhere to go. Nowhere but up, apparently.

Looming before her was an impossible sight. A whirlpool had risen off the ocean's surface like a tornado, and it had to be more than a hundred feet across. The sea spray fogged up her flight goggles and stung her exposed cheeks. Charizard roared, agitated by all the water, but at least it wasn't raining. She had to make it to the coast of Shamouti, land somewhere. That was where Lance would be, she was sure of it. He wouldn't be fool enough to be flying in this weather.

Unless he'd already called Lugia forth. What else could raise up a whirlpool like that? Maybe she was too late. Maybe he'd already done what he'd come to do, whatever that was, and he was leaving. Already gone.

No, don't think like that.

He was here, he was waiting. Mewtwo wouldn't lie, not about this. Fumbling a little to maintain her balance on Aerodactyl's leathery back, Lily touched her fingers to the Earth Badge pinned on the left breast of her armor. Proof that brains were just as important as brawn in a fight to the death.

I can do this. I can.

Charizard roared as the winds grew stronger and the sea spray soaked its tough scales in a watery sheen. Aerodactyl swerved on the wind, and Lily nearly lost her grip.

"Steady, Rocky!" she shouted over the screaming winds.

The colossal whirlpool raged and twisted, and from within its depths came a blood-curdling roar. If Death itself had a fanfare to welcome it, she imagined it would sound something like this. The fear was palpable in the air and in the thrashing waters that continued to swell. Aerodactyl and Charizard felt it, too, and flew like mad to get away from the mass of unearthly power.

The shore came into view below, half flooded by the churning waves. The higher grounds, nothing but chewed up rock, appeared safe to land, though, so she steered Aerodactyl toward them, all the while with an eye out for Lance. So far, no sign of him.

Where are you?

Lightning flashed overhead, followed immediately after by a crack of thunder, and she wondered how Ash was doing on his search for Zapdos. She could only hope the thunderstorm meant good news, but out here by herself, there was no one to reassure her but her own self.

Charizard swooped down and landed with a crash, already ticked off and eager to bite into something as its flaming tail lashed. Aerodactyl was right behind it and touched down higher up. It dug its wing-claws into the rocky shore to maintain balance and took the opportunity to sniff the air, look around. To the north, Shamouti's rocky coast gave way to fields and sparse trees, and farther still she could make out manmade structures, more ruins long abandoned. No good. Her advantage would be to stick closer to the water where her Dragons were at their most versatile.

With that thought in mind, she reached for the three Pokéballs at her belt just as another roar sounded from deep within the whirlpool.

And then, a voice:

"You can't resist me! Wake up!"

The fear Lily had been toting around like a ball and chain finally succeeded in staggering her. Petrified and heart beating so fast and hard she was sure she would shatter if not for the hand on Aerodactyl's neck, she turned to look across the crescent bay. And

there he was.

All in black, an impressive cape heavy enough to barely flutter in the chaotic winds, hair like fire that matched the glow around him.

The glow...

She dared not blink as she stared at the personification of her compounded night terrors these past days. Maybe it was a trick of the light, a figment of her imagination, but she could swear he was aglow with a sinister, crimson veil that extended beyond his outstretched hands. Wings spread behind him, elongated and stretched out, like a shadow in waning light.

But she blinked, and the illusion was gone.

"*Human?"*

Clair's papercut smile curled at the ends and revealed a row of ultra-white, sharp teeth. The word had never sounded so insulting in Lily's memory than it did now.

Charizard had hunkered down on all fours as it glared at Lance and his Dragonair, one with scales sleek as sapphire and the other rosy mauve, black smoke rising from its nostrils and between razor sharp teeth. Maybe it felt what she felt. Evil? No, she decided, just *wrong*.

She tossed out Tyranitar's Pokéball, and the green dinosaur materialized in a wash of light to stand between Aerodactyl and Charizard. Yellow eyes, demonic in a way no other Pokémon's eyes could quite match, peered down at Lily once Tyranitar took stock of its unfamiliar surroundings.

Lips pressed together, she reached out a hand toward the hulking creature, careful not to make any sudden moves. Tyranitar lowered its head to see her better and growled low in the pit of its armored belly. This thing scared the crap out of Lily, she wasn't above admitting it to herself, but it was also on her side. A part of Ivy, here to fight in the girl's absence.

"I need your help," Lily said over the howling winds. "All of you."

Aerodactyl bared its teeth at Tyranitar, but the latter glared at it, totally unafraid despite its comparatively shrimpy stature. Standing between these three Pokémon, it was easy to believe they shared some of the Dragonsblood that flowed in her veins. Diluted, as Clair might

say. What the hell did that matter standing shoulder to shoulder with three of the most powerful species of Pokémon in the world?

The giant whirlpool Lance seemed to be directing like a snake charmer raged, and Lily knew she had a very narrow window of opportunity here. Scared shitless but with no intention of backing down now when Ash and the others were counting on her, she pointed at Lance and his two Dragonair.

"Give him everything you got!" she spat.

Aerodactyl shrieked and jumped into the air, soaring at a low altitude and opening its mouth. Charizard hissed, salivating at a chance to rip into something, and flew after Aerodactyl. They charged up a Hyper Beam and a Fire Blast, respectively, and closed in on Lance from behind almost too fast for Lily to follow with her eyes.

Tyranitar roared loud enough to drown out the howling winds and slammed its trunk-like fists into the rocky beach. A devastating Earthquake attack picked up momentum and gravity as it raced toward Lance, ever faster and more destructive as it split open weeping chasms that swallowed the beach as they traveled.

The last sight she saw just as bright blue and white light connected with the ground where Lance stood, ground that was fast disintegrating under Tyranitar's power, was his profile as it turned to catch the first sight of her. Dark eyes, narrowed in concentration on his task, jaw clenched from the mental effort, hands raised to the sky.

And he smiled.

"Fuck, it's cold."

Ivy rubbed her mouth to brush away the freezing crystals that grew thicker with each successive breath she took. She made her way carefully out of the chute down which she'd fallen, and soon came upon a wide cavern paved in ice. She paused at the entrance, dumbstruck.

"Oh my god..."

The floor was a smooth ocean of rock frozen over by a thick layer of ice. Stalagmites pierced the ice, the tallest of which were twice her height. Light filtered in from tiny breaks in the frozen ceiling, casting a shimmering, blue-grey glow throughout the cathedral-like pocket. It

had to be at least a half mile across and just as tall, enormous. Fat veins of iron, sparkling under a layer of black ice, criss-crossed the walls. Just looking at them made her shiver a little. One touch with her bare hand, and her skin would rip clean off. But as beautiful and deadly as the natural, glacial pocket was, it was the evidence of men that held Ivy's rapt attention.

Graves. Hundreds of them. Carved from iron and ice, organized in a series of rows, some clustered to denote familial ties, even a few mausoleums stacked with ice and stone bricks, expertly carved. An open-air altar, perhaps for religious ceremonies, stood tall in the center of the silent cemetery. She had fallen straight into a refrigerated graveyard.

Ivy ventured out onto the ice gingerly, almost timidly. The nearest grave had a headstone, where even after what she imagined had to be at least a thousand years, the chiseled epitaph was still clearly visible, though she could not hope to read it. The script was foreign to her, too looping and fluid to even remotely resemble the common script used today. It wasn't hard to guess what it said, though.

"Dead, for a certainty. And nobody alive to remember you."

She peered into the cask, a perfectly geometrical ice tomb, and saw the face of whoever occupied it. Even frozen, decay had found its way to this poor soul, and a leathery skeleton, its jaw twisted and misshapen, stared back at her.

"Guess that coulda been me."

No one answered, and despite her cavernous surroundings, not even her voice echoed. It was like the space here swallowed anything that ventured into it and kept them, frozen forever. Ivy flexed her fingers. They worked fine, just like everything else had after her escape from death back on Cinnabar.

"Guess it sorta was me..."

Whatever had happened to her, she didn't talk about it with anyone, not even Gary. It was over and done with, and that was that. No point in dwelling on what-ifs. But in this place that was redolent with emptiness despite the many souls that filled the space, there was an inescapable dread that lingered in the shadows, hiding in those black iron veins. Death dwelled here, a true iteration of it. She recognized its presence, a shadow in the corner of her vision, the feeling of eyes on her back, watching but never pushy. All it had to do was wait. It

always found what it was looking for in the end.

Losing interest in the grave and pushing those thoughts to the back of her mind, she peered across the way toward the altar. There didn't appear to be another way out of this place, though she would have to explore a bit to be certain. That altar in the center looked like a pretty obvious place to start.

But the eyes on her back were becoming insistent, too powerful to ignore.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said aloud, but with conviction. "So don't fuck with me."

No answer.

Ivy smirked to herself. There was one good thing about being alone—she didn't have to fear for others. And after everything that had happened, she never feared for herself.

Best to get out of here quickly before the high went to her head.

Reaching for the Great Ball attached to her belt, she let out Wigglytuff and cradled the plump rabbit in her arms. Wigglytuff immediately began to shiver and pawed at Ivy's chest and shoulders, distressed.

"It's okay, girl. I know it's cold, but I could use your ears. Can't hear a damned thing in this quiet."

She scratched Wigglytuff behind the ears, and slowly the pink rabbit calmed down. Having never liked to be picked up, Wigglytuff instead made its way to Ivy's shoulder and balanced on its extra-long hind legs, front paws on her head to hang on. Ivy peered up at it.

"Just lemme know if you hear anything, okay? I'm gonna start looking."

She began wending her way among the tombstones, careful to watch her step. Wigglytuff's weight on her shoulders was a comfort in this desolate, dreary place, and she trusted the fluffy bunny with her life. If something besides her paranoia was here, Wigglytuff would pick up on it.

The altar was in her sights, a wide expanse clear of graves and ringed by ice columns. There was no roof over it, just the open air, but a thin sliver in the cavern ceiling directly above shed light onto the structure

and illuminated it in ethereal aquas and indigos. So much beauty surrounded by so much death.

Closer to the altar, she came across an odd sight—a body, but no tombstone. It was frozen on the ground and bent out of shape. Curious, Ivy stopped and kneeled down to examine it. Its clothes had dissolved to nothing, and the corpse itself was dry, blackened bone held together by sinewy skin and muscle sucked dry of their juices and suctioned to the bone. She made a face at the grisly sight and wondered how long it had taken for the body to get to this stage. Or worse, how long it had taken the person to die here.

"Looks like you got stuck."

She noticed the corpse's foot wedged between a stalagmite's base and the coffin it was draped over. The foot was warped and twisted almost beyond recognition. A trickle of trepidation began to flutter at the base of Ivy's neck as her thoughts raced.

"Why wouldn't you cut off the foot to escape...?"

Wigglytuff's scream, an awful, high-pitched shriek that could split ear drums, filled the cavern without warning. But it was the cold snap that brushed Ivy's shoulder that spurred her into action. Without thinking, she leaped to her feet and jumped with all her might. A stalagmite a short ways off caught her, and she wrapped her hand around it to slide farther. Wigglytuff had scrambled to her chest and clung to her shoulders when Ivy slid to a halt on her hands and knees, out of breath like she'd just run a mile at breakneck speed.

Blue eyes darted around behind her, but there was nothing. Nothing but the frigid burn in her shoulder. Wigglytuff ambled onto her back, and she poked at her aching shoulder experimentally. The armor was frozen solid, frosted over and smoking. A chunk of her hair, brittle as blown glass, shattered under her touch and fell in shards to the ground. Anger heated her cheeks despite the cold, and she once again looked back at the spot where she'd found the corpse. Standing, rolling her chilled shoulder to try to get some feeling back in it, she forced herself to remain calm and see instead of just looking.

The corpse, the stalagmite that imprisoned it, even the damned ice coffin next to it had frozen. The *ice* had frozen over itself. Small ripples of frost painted the cold surfaces and bit into them, a cold even cold shivered from.

Wigglytuff's ears twitched erratically, and its wide eyes stared at a

spot on a the floor near the corpse. A thin crack in the ice, a black vein that led to some level below. The edges puffed with fresh frost as an invisible air vent released super-chilled air.

"Silent as a creep-ass ice grave, huh."

Gary wasn't here to correct whatever error she assumed she'd made, but the meaning was clear in her mind. Apparently, that corpse had had no time to even contemplate self-amputation. The air currents would have frozen him solid. Slowly.

Ivy reached up and patted Wigglytuff. "Remind me to find a nice carrot patch to turn you loose on when we get outta here for hearing that weird draft. Keep it up."

Wigglytuff leaned on her head, alert as ever and nose twitching. Extra careful to watch her step, Ivy continued toward the altar in the center of the cavern. No sign of further cracks in the floor leaking lethal air, so far.

The altar itself was an impressive structure, ten feet tall and carved entirely out of ice. There was more of that looping, ancient script Ivy couldn't read, as well as some pictograms of men and women kneeling before coffins. At the base of the altar was a carving of a bird, wings outstretched to the heavens.

Articuno.

Ivy took a moment to look at the pictures. In them, Articuno was pictured below the carvings of the coffins and mourners. Backing up, Ivy looked around the floor surrounding the altar. There had to be something here...

The frost burn on her shoulder had dulled to a low simmer, but she was not looking forward to removing her armor and assessing the damage when this was all over. Something told her she would have a permanent, black frostbite tattoo there. Best not to get caught in another draft and help it spread.

"Okay, this is taking too long." She looked back at the mass grave. "Sorry, but this is kinda important. Wigglytuff." She pointed at the altar. "Blast that sucker."

Wigglytuff jumped from Ivy's shoulder and let loose a formidable Moonblast at nearly point-blank range. Ivy threw up her arms to shield her face, and a resounding *crack* filled the vacuous cavern

louder than any thunder in the dead silence. The blast was strong enough to rattle the floor, and four of the columns directly behind the altar were completely eradicated, reduced to icy rubble. When the pink light died down, the altar so carefully and painstakingly carved was nothing but dust, and a dark hole opened up at the base with stairs leading down to another chamber.

Good thing Lily and Gary aren't here to yell at me for desecrating a piece of history.

Ivy took a deep breath and headed downstairs. The air became noticeably chillier, and every breath burned her throat. Wigglytuff's thick fat kept it insulated well enough, but it too shivered even as it maintained its vigil over her head.

The light was scarce down here, but Ivy managed as she always did. The walls were solid ice cut with rock and iron deeper beneath, like they had all been thrown together in a mixing bowl and poured into a mold. It was the strangest phenomenon, and she had to wonder how this island could even exist in a tropical ocean, let alone retain its composition. Maybe the ancients buried above had marveled at that, too. Small wonder they turned this place into a holy ground for their dead.

As she descended and the air grew colder, the feel of the wall under her hand began to change. Gone were the iron and rock, replaced by something paler and far, far harder.

"Holy shit," she said. "That's diamond."

Fat veins of pure diamond cut through the ice, glittering dully in the wan light but dazzling nonetheless. Wigglytuff cast the stuff a passing glance but was more concerned with keeping its eyes and ears trained ahead, where the stairs ended and the path curved to the right. Ivy drew a knife in one hand and her Master Ball in the other, steeling herself for whatever she might find around that bend.

But when she turned the corner, she was still rendered speechless and humbled beyond words.

Coffins, a small handful of them, were lined up in a neat row before her. All of them were carved from pure diamond, the kings and queens the ancients had revered almost as much as the secret they guarded.

Beyond the coffins, innumerable chains of diamond and iron and stone

criss-crossed over a hunched figure, dusted in frost and unmoving, statuesque. Even curled in on itself, its diamond-cut crest peaked at about thirty feet in height. Ivy's neck hurt just looking up at it. Articuno, the legendary Ice Bird and keeper of death that permeated this place, was frozen solid and dead to the world.

The first thing that struck her was not the chains binding it, nor was it the fact that the beast was apparently frozen and quite possibly dead. It was the taint, the pitch that bled through its tightly-packed feathers and dyed it an abyssal shade of black. Devoid of light and warmth save for the sheen of sapphire that glinted off its frosted edges when she looked at it just so.

"Articuno," Ivy managed, barely.

Somewhere in her trek down here, she had become covered in a thin layer of frost. Ice crystals plugged her nose and made it hard to breath, danced on her tongue and made swallowing an exercise in self-torture. Even her eyelashes were dusted white with frostlings, and every time she blinked death gnawed at her precious eyes, eyes that could see through the permanent shadow overcasting Articuno.

All her life she had been terrified of birds, kin to the one that had torn her away from a life that could have been simple, happy, hers. But this... This was nothing like Ho-oh. There was no light, no warmth, no *life* radiating from this monster.

And the eyes that had followed her this whole way... They stared her down now, face to face, no longer lurking.

The Master Ball had acquired its own layer of frost in her fingers. Wigglytuff burrowed into her hair, either from the cold or out of fear and reverence for a power older than time. A shaky breath snapped Ivy out of her trance with a lancing pain in her throat. She couldn't stay down here much longer unless she really wanted to freeze. Coming back to life once was a freebie. Twice? She wasn't about to get greedy.

How am I gonna get you outta those chains?

She had no idea what she was doing. There was no magic switch or incantation, no esoteric knowledge bestowed on a so-called chosen one. There was just a power she didn't understand and a situation she couldn't get out of. What to do?

Wigglytuff nuzzled her ear for warmth, probably as afraid as she was.

"Articuno," Ivy said again, trying her best to swallow the knives in her throat. "I dunno if you can hear me in there, but I need your help. Um..."

No answer. Was this thing even alive?

Is there a difference?

"I don't even know if this'll work." She lifted the Master Ball. "But with Lugia here, I don't have a choice. So please, just...wake up."

Silence. She felt ridiculous, and that was saying something since she could barely feel any other part of her body. Frost crawled up her legs and arms, hungry for what little warmth remained to her. It became harder to bend her joints and move. Wigglytuff tucked its large ears against its back, wary.

"You h-hear me in there?" Ivy said through chattering teeth, raising the Master Ball. "Wake up!"

The frost was relentless, and she barely got the Master Ball out of her hand before it froze over her elbow joint. Gagging on the cold, Ivy collapsed to her knees as the Master Ball hit the Articuno statue and cracked open. Red light flashed and engulfed the statue for a few seconds before all of a sudden, it was gone. The ball snapped shut and fell to the ground among the chains, and Ivy stared.

No fucking way.

"You gotta be kidding—"

The Master Ball exploded and shattered without warning and released a blast of super-chilled air that sent Ivy and Wigglytuff flying back until they landed hard against the diamond-slashed wall of the cavern. Something hot trickled down Ivy's throat, blood perhaps, and sent a ripping pain all the way down to her lungs.

After so long in the cold, dead silence, the shrieking cry that suddenly filled the cavern was earth-shattering. Long and mournful, a song yet an explosion at the same time, and very likely the last sound many before her had ever heard. Stone shattered. Iron twisted. Even the diamond-carved shackles burst and turned to dust under the arctic malice that suddenly filled the subterranean chamber.

Ivy tried to see through her frozen eyelashes, wondering vaguely if her eyes themselves would turn to slush down here. Wigglytuff shook in

her lap, curled into a ball.

But before her, in all its glory, Articuno dug its very much alive talons into the ice-packed ground, each as tall as Ivy. Its great, dark wings spread and sent razor-sharp winds into the walls that sliced through them like a hot knife through butter. A wicked beak, grey and sharper than any sword, hooked at a cruel angle beneath blood-red eyes, eyes that trained on Ivy now. Its chains were broken, its sleep disturbed. Forty feet tall from claw to crest, Articuno glared down at its intruder and lowered its beak toward her.

If it wasn't too freaking cold even to think straight, Ivy was pretty sure she would have pissed herself right there.

"H-Help me," she said through chattering teeth. "I've already d-died once. Maybe y-you know what that's l-like."

Articuno peered at her with those terrible, smoldering eyes for what seemed like eons. It would be a long time before she ever forgot that feeling—staring death quite literally in the eye. The massive bird reared up and screeched, its beak opening wide to release a glowing, blue light. Ivy could only clutch Wigglytuff to her and trust that should Death come calling again so soon, she would have enough feeling in her feet to kick it in the balls.

Arcanine landed on the hardened lava lightly, thanks to Alakazam's Confusion cushioning the fall. Smoke rose from where the canine's paws connected with the blackened crust, but Arcanine seemed not to notice. Gary thanked his foresight in keeping a Fire-type Pokémon on his team.

Arcanine treaded slowly across the lava crust, testing each step before leaning its weight into it. Gary's hair was damp and limp against his forehead, the heat thick and sticky down here. Alakazam was not faring much better. He had a thought, but before he could even form the words to express it, Alakazam understood and waved the spoons in its hands. A wondrous, yellow force field materialized out of thin air and surrounded Arcanine and its rider completely, blocking out enough heat to be bearable.

"Thanks," Gary said, wiping the sweat from his brow and wincing when some of it dripped into his eye.

They continued on, Gary doing his best to keep an eye out for anything suspicious. Without warning, Arcanine leaped abruptly about

halfway to the other side of the volcano and Gary lurched, whiplash snapping his head back. An unseen force kept him in place and probably from snapping his neck, and in the background an intense heat wave chased them as they flew. Arcanine landed and Gary, disoriented, clutched his aching head. It felt like his brain was boiling in his blood, it was so hot. His vision doubled, and involuntarily, he fell into the Miracle Eye state.

Suddenly, the world came into stark relief and he could see through four more eyes other than his own. Alakazam looked back at the source of the heat that ate away at the Safeguard it had put up, a crack in the crust that bubbled over with superheated steam and magma, a hiccup in the volcano's dormancy. Arcanine looked ahead, keen eyes trained on further weaknesses in the crust and carefully assessing where to step next.

"Damnit," Gary swore. "That was too close."

He blinked, and the Miracle Eye faded, leaving him in his own head once more. Arcanine had stopped and whined a little, waiting for Gary's encouragement.

"It's okay, boy. Just keep a close eye out."

Arcanine yipped and started off again, slowly, but Alakazam's concern radiated off it in waves. A fresh Safeguard was in place, but it wouldn't do much against a sea of magma. Gary tightened his grip on Arcanine's lush mane.

Swoosh!

Another crack in the crust erupted with a hot burst of steam and a spew of magma just inches from Arcanine's muzzle.

"Jump!" Gary said.

Arcanine moved to obey, but Alakazam also heard the urgent command and pulsed with Confusion. With a Psychic boost, Arcanine leaped high into the air and flew forward. Another crack opened up underfoot, and the canine swerved in midair.

"Extreme Speed!" Gary shouted.

Fire licked at Arcanine's curled lips and belied its anger at the unpredictable situation. But swift as ever, it took off in a blur of speed. Unfortunately, the sudden disturbance set off a chain reaction

in the volcanic crust, and new cracks opened up all over the place, spewing lava and deadly steam.

Psychic!

Gary's silent command spurred Alakazam into further action, and it unleashed a wave of power that rippled beneath Arcanine's paws. The Psychic energy clashed with the steam and lava and warped it just out of Arcanine's path. Lava looped and flew high into the air in cresting arcs, only to fall back to the crust and melt holes in it. Arcanine touched down on a patch of crust and it cracked beneath its weight. Lava burst up on all sides, and Gary's eyes bled to white out of fear and instinct.

He shot out a hand and before he could even utter the word—*away!*—the lava parted and Arcanine sailed through. Some of the magma splashed its haunches, but the fiery canine could stand a little heat.

"Flame Wheel!"

Arcanine's paws kicked up fire and blazed a trail as it dashed in a blur, right and left, toward the altar. The fire underfoot crusted over the brittle ground just enough to keep it from shattering underfoot again. But as soon as Arcanine cleared a patch of safe ground, it crumbled behind it and melted to magma.

Soon the altar came into jumping range just above.

"There!"

Alakazam raised its hands and released a blue wave of light just as Arcanine leaped. Powered by a Confusion attack, Arcanine soared through the air, a plume of magma on its tail. The lava splashed its tufted tail and signed the fur, but Extreme Speed was extreme for a reason. Solid ground met Arcanine's padded paws as it landed at the edge of the altar, clear of the volatile lava, and panted.

"I officially hate volcanoes."

Alakazam buzzed with confusion, unsure why such an unhelpful comment would be warranted at this time. Gary glared at the Psychic and slipped off Arcanine's back. He scratched the big canine's mane.

"Good job. And you." He glanced at Alakazam. "Get over here. I have a feeling we'll need to make it a lot hotter in here."

He gave the Pokémon a hand down from Arcanine's back, and the three of them gathered around the altar. It was inscribed with a looping text Gary couldn't decipher much of, but that he recognized as the Old Tongue, the language of the ancients. Languages had never been his strong suit, but Oak had made him read about the Old Tongue a bit when he was younger. Most of what was here on the altar was foreign to him, but he could make out a few words.

"Fire... Hot river? No, that must mean lava." Frustrated and finding it exceedingly difficult to concentrate in this heat, Gary wiped his brow again and tried to remain calm. "I can't read this. I don't understand what it's saying. Damnit!"

Arcanine whined and nudged him in the back with its muzzle, but Alakazam remained still and silent, its sunken eyes boring into Gary's profile. The two of them locked eyes.

"If I can't read it, how can I know what to do next?"

Alakazam merely stared at him.

"If I improvise, we could all die. I'm not Ash. Or Ivy, for that matter. There's no coming back if I die."

Alakazam continued to stare a hole into him. Arcanine whined softly.

"Okay, okay. It's just the heat, I know. I can figure this out."

"*You're Gary Oak, my best friend. And I believe in you."*

Gary swallowed, unprepared for the throat-clenching emotions that bubbled forth when he recalled Ash's candor. His eyes stung from the heat and sulfur, and he rubbed them furiously.

"Goddamnit."

Determined, he kneeled down in front of the altar again and traced the looping script with his fingers. Sweat dribbled down his temples, over his eyelashes, into the sides of his mouth. He had to figure this out. He was Gary Oak, damnit. He was smart enough to read a fucking instruction manual weathered and smoothed out from heat and time in a dead language that hadn't been used in over a thousand years.

"This is lava, I'm sure of it. And this... Something about a...a bloom? No, that can't be right. Fire...and blooming...the lava..." He looked over his shoulder down at the crusted ocean of lava and paled. "Shit."

Not bloom. Burst.

Alakazam picked up on his train of thought before he did and turned to face the pit. Arcanine tilted its head and made a noise that was somewhere between a whine and a growl, its ears perked up in curiosity. Gary stood up and patted its muzzle.

"We're gonna need a to make a big explosion down here. You ready, boy?"

Arcanine panted, always eager to participate. Alakazam was decidedly less enthusiastic.

"Just...concentrate on keeping us from burning to a crisp," Gary grumbled.

He selected the Master Ball from his belt and held it out. Could it withstand the heat of a volcano? There was only one way to find out.

"Moltres," he called out to the pit of black lava below. "If you can hear me down there..." He winced, for once glad he was alone in pulling this out of his ass and hoping for the best. Ash would have never let him live it down. "I'm only here because I need your help to stop Lugia, nothing else. So...don't kill me."

I'm gonna die here.

Somehow, it didn't scare him as much as he thought it would. He'd evaded death so many times. Deaths that should have been his, as Mewtwo taunted him in his nightmares. Maybe it was finally time to pay up. If he failed here, there would be no getting out of it.

He glanced back up toward the stairs he'd walked down. Fire was the essence of life, but it could also snuff it out if left to run wild and unchecked. It wasn't much, but it was all he had to go on.

"Okay," he said, approaching the edge. "Arcanine, Fire Blast it with everything you've got."

Arcanine snarled and reared back, its mouth aflame, and blasted a thick column of blue fire at the pit below. At the same time, Alakazam initiated another Safeguard around them all. Gary's eyes bled to white, and the lava bubbling deep below the surface of the crust burned bright in his third eye. When Arcanine's attack hit the crust, it cut through and dug down deep to the soft magma below. Orange geysers burst through exploited weaknesses in the crust, one after another,

until the heat was so thick and searing that Gary gagged and collapsed to one knee.

Little by little, the black crust melted away and fresh magma rose up in its place. Miracle Eye seared the image in Gary's retinas, blinding heat and light, and his head began to ache with a familiar migraine more intense than any he'd had before. And brighter than it all, a large mass rose up from the depths of that fiery ocean. Or maybe it was him hallucinating. Or maybe this was all a hallucination, and he was back in that hospital bed on Cinnabar, enjoying another of Mewtwo's colorful memory trips.

Alakazam's presence pinged the edges of his consciousness, urgent and very real, and he knew this was not a hallucination, but it was very much a nightmare. Barely able to breathe through the extreme heat, Gary shuffled on his hands and knees toward the edge of the altar. Two abysmal pits, so dark red they were nearly black, floated to the surface of the churning magma as turbulent as the seas surrounding the island. Another nightmare? He couldn't be sure, but he only had one shot at this.

"I just...just want your help," he slurred, barely conscious now. His tongue was spongy and thick in his mouth, and he was afraid if he wasn't careful he might swallow it.

Lurching forward, he hung over the edge and dropped the Master Ball into the lava. It cracked open as it fell and burst with red light just as it sank into the magma, probably melting as soon as it hit it. Gary's eyes didn't stay open long enough to watch.

The next thing he knew, the heat was bearing down on him like a blanket smothering whatever life he was holding onto, stealing his oxygen and crushing the will to live. Alakazam still lingered somewhere on the edges of his consciousness, and he struggled with all his might to reach for it. A shrill squawk shattered the heat-induced haze, and he vaguely remembered rolling over, something sharp closing around his arm but losing hold of him. Barking. Falling.

And a fresh wave of cool air that peeled away the stifling heat, so refreshing he could have cried.

I'm dead, he realized. *I've died.*

Fire and magma danced around him, oozed over him, and yet all he felt was the calm, a cool draft sustaining him. With nothing left to lose, he cracked open his eyes and suddenly wished he hadn't.

Fire carried him, woven tightly into compacted, downy feathers that didn't burn him. Lava spewed all around him, sloshing against his legs but leaving him unscathed. And the scream, otherworldly. When they say a scream can wake the dead, they must be talking about this sound.

He was flying, carried on a sun flare. Moltres the Fire Bird, keeper of life, flapped its massive wings and sent a squall of holy fire down on the dormant volcano, the final thread cut to unleash its long-dormant wrath. Somehow, Gary's hands found Alakazam's and Arcanine's Pokéballs and called them back as he did his best to sit up, understand what was happening, because no way in hell this had worked. No way he was rising out of a soon-to-be-active volcano with Moltres.

The magma reached its breaking point below, and the fires that didn't burn swirled around Gary as he looked up. Instead of stealing the air, the fire seemed to create it, teem with it.

And then the volcano burst beneath him.

Ash landed hard on his side, only his Ghosts' protective Aura shielding him from real harm. Something cracked near his left ear and he whipped his head around to see a jagged lightning bolt zigzagging straight for him. He opened his mouth to scream, but a tiny silhouette leaped in between him and the lightning, taking the hit and redirecting it to the nearest copper lightning rod.

Panting, Ash got to his feet. "Nice timing, ChuChu."

The yellow rodent squeaked up at him, redolent with electricity, and skittered off ahead. Mismagius and Gengar whispered in his ears, more vociferous and harder to ignore now that there were two of them. But they urged him forward, and that much he was willing to listen to.

Taking off again, Ash ran to catch up to the two speeding Pikachu. Lightning buzzed and struck just ahead of him, stopping him in his tracks, and he veered right. His Pikachu noticed the setback and turned tail toward him. Undeterred, Ash attempted a leap forward and sailed ten feet through the air. That was as far as he got before he caught a lightning bolt in the back.

Crying out, he crumpled to the ground on shaking limbs. Mismagius and Gengar had absorbed the brunt of the attack, but he could still feel the telltale swelling welts blooming between his shoulder blades.

Pikachu was at his side in an instant and scrambled up his shoulder before releasing a powerful Thunder attack that hit the five poles closest to them. They all absorbed the electricity, flashing bright before petering out. A brief respite.

"Pika, keep moving. I'm okay," Ash managed, ignoring the pain in his back as best he could.

Pikachu looked up at him, concerned, but chased after him when he took off running again. The lightning was entirely unpredictable and erratic. Surge's Gym was a walk in the park compared to this, and this time he had rubber-lined armor and two Ghosts watching his back. His throat swelled and clenched up inhaling the supercharged air, and the latent static electricity in the air was beginning to pebble the skin around his lips with tiny welts. If he stayed in the thick of this much longer, it wouldn't matter how many bolts the two Pikachu could redirect.

Dead ahead at the back of the cave under a high skylight stood a stone altar, and directly behind it a cocoon of some sort fashioned from bent copper and stone like some modern art sculpture. That was Ash's goal, and it was the only thing he forced himself to concentrate on.

"Let's go!" he shouted at Pika and ChuChu. "Charge!"

The two Pikachu flanked Ash as he took off at a hard sprint and glowed with electricity. The ancient lightning rods zapped the three of them, but the two Pikachu absorbed the bolts and glowed ever brighter. Ash kept his eye on the prize, but the two rodents keeping him safe scintillated to the point of bursting, and he knew in the back of his mind that if they kept it up for much longer, they could overload and fry.

The altar was just ahead. "Almost there!"

A thick lightning bolt jumped between two copper poles and headed straight for Ash just as he neared the steps out of this minefield, but Pika and ChuChu both jumped to meet it. A blinding flash took Ash by surprise and he faltered, tripping over the stairs and skidding on the cold, stone floor. His cheek and temple burned, scraped up and the small boils forming upon them burst. But his pain was nugatory as he remembered the two Pikachu risking their lives to get him here.

"Pika! ChuChu!"

They had also jumped with Ash out of the minefield, directly through

the last thunderbolt, and skidded over the stone to come to a rest against the altar just ahead. Ash struggled to his feet, Mismagius and Gengar pouring out of him, and scrambled toward the two Pikachu.

"Hey, little guys," he said, voice thick with cotton from breathing the air in here for too long. "Hey, c'mon, you're okay, right?"

ChuChu stirred, its fur needled with latent electricity, and opened its eyes. It got to its feet and shook itself out as though wet, but the static remained, making its fur stand on end. Pika breathed, but remained on the floor.

"Pika, buddy," Ash said, leaning over the small rodent.

ChuChu prodded it with its snout and squeaked, and Pika began to stir. Ash wanted to scoop them both up in his arms, but the static electricity jumping in between them stayed his hand. One touch and he could get enough volts to electrocute him to death.

"You're okay," he said, the relief evident in his voice.

Mismagius floated up behind him, and Gengar squatted down next to him to peer at the two Pikachu. A tremor of emotion passed through Ash, far stronger than he expected now that he had two Ghosts to contend with. But he managed a smile.

"Gengar and Mismagius're glad you're okay, too," he reassured the two Pikachu. "You guys were awesome back there, for real, you know?"

Mismagius sent another chill down Ash's spine, and he winced. This Ghost was better at focusing its emotional pull than Gengar, and Ash had a hard time tempering it. But when he looked up and followed Mismagius's vacant gaze, he appreciated the urgency for once.

Before him, the twisted structure he'd noticed earlier grew out of the ground, bars of copper intertwined with thick chunks of obsidian and shale. They folded on top of each other such that it was impossible to see in between them. Above, water dripped down from a natural spring and doused the strange structure. Condensation popped and fizzled upon the copper, but otherwise did not disturb the whole structure.

"Huh. That's weird."

Gengar approached the mass and began to examine it. When it touched one of the copper veins, it pulled its hand back and jumped,

dissolved halfway into gas as the rotted skull it toted around clacked in surprise. The Ghost cackled, highly amused.

Mismagius, however, was more interested in the altar, so Ash decided to give it the benefit of the doubt and take a look. There were strange markings, maybe some kind of writing, but nothing he'd ever seen before. The pictures made even less sense since they were faded and chipped almost beyond recognition. He glanced back at the weird sculpture. It was enormous, nearly forty feet tall and just as wide.

"You know what? That looks kinda like a cage to me."

Mismagius stared up at him, and Gengar began to giggle maniacally.

"Gary would probably skin me if he was here, but he's not. So let's just see what works, yeah?"

He walked around the structure, but there appeared to be no weak points or obvious entryways. If he was getting in there, it would have to be with brute force. As he walked around the front of the bulbous structure, he caught sight of the minefield again.

"Hey, that might work..."

The two Pikachu looked up at him, curious and sparking. He grinned.

"Okay, I got one last crazy idea. Gengar, Mismagius, come over here a sec."

He directed the Ghosts and the two Pikachu back toward the minefield and tried to impart what he meant to do. Ghosts were smarter than most Pokémon, but they only had one shot at this and he wanted to make sure everything was clear.

When Ash righted himself and moved to get into position, he swayed, dizzy, and nearly lost his balance. The lack of breathable air here was getting to him, and his throat was beginning to swell up beyond the point of ignoring it.

Right. Gotta hurry so I'll beat Gary to Shamouti...

He smiled a little and retreated to kneel by the altar. There was nowhere safe in the small space, but he felt better holding onto something.

"Okay, ready? Charge up!"

The two Pikachu, spaced several feet apart at the edge of the stairs that led back to the minefield, began to discharge electricity while Gengar and Mismagius hovered, gaseous, just above them. The ancient lightning rods crackled and sparked, reacting to the new source of energy, and began throwing thunderbolts at the two Pikachu. They staggered, inundated with more power than their little bodies could handle, but Gengar and Mismagius melted into them, a kind of shield. Too long, though, and that shield could turn venomous as it had with the poor possessed Pokémon in Lavender.

Ash wasn't about to take that gamble. "Now! Volt Tackle!"

The two Pikachu took off at blinding speed and leaped over Ash's head. Jagged electricity trailed behind them and grew over them, laced with violet spectral light. Ash's hair stood on end and electricity burned through the sweat trickling down his temples, raising new electrical burns on his face and around his eyes. But he had to keep watching, make sure his Pokémon would be okay.

They didn't even make contact with the structure before it exploded in electricity. The water soaking it sucked it up and spread it all over the structure, and when the two Pikachu slammed into the intertwining minerals, the energy reached a breaking point and burst. Ash ducked down and covered his head as best he could, and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. The light died down, and tired squeaking sounded just ahead at the foot of the structure. He looked up and saw the two Pikachu huddled together, still sparking a little, but no longer glowing with latent energy. Relieved to see them okay, he skidded toward them and scooped them up in his arms. Gengar and Mismagius emerged from out of thin air, unharmed but dissolved to nothing but miasma and glowing eyes.

The structure, however, had not lost its spark, unlike the two tired rodents resting in Ash's arms.

"Whoa!"

He scrambled back as an errant lightning bolt struck the damp ground near his feet. The cage whined under the jumping currents. The copper bars glowed as though superheated, and before his eyes the stone and obsidian began to crack under the pressure. Lightning shot from the cage's head and reached for the darkened sky overhead, perhaps calling to the storm that was forming over Shamouti. Or perhaps creating its own.

Ash got to his feet as Gengar and Mismagius merged with him again and generated the spectral aegis he'd grown to depend on in situations when his mortality was at stake, which was more often than he cared to admit. Lightning jumped overhead, making him duck, but there was nowhere to run, not with the minefield still behind him. He could only watch the structure, a cell, he was sure of it, begin to implode on itself.

If there was ever a time for last words, he figured now was it.

"Hey! Zapdos, if you're in there, then drag your lazy ass outta bed and gimme a hand out here!"

Whatever spirits passed that lingered here could go suck it—he was in trouble, and decorum had never been his strong suit.

The cage imploded further, the copper bursting as it was overloaded with electrical current and the obsidian shattering. Over the ear-splitting cracking and the roar of thunder from the storm over Shamouti, a banshee-like shriek penetrated the acropolis and seemed to cut through the stifling air with physical force. Ash fell back on his rear and clutched the two Pikachu to him.

The stone foundation holding the cage together crumbled, and the whole structure came apart at the seams. Copper twisting grinded in Ash's ears, and they popped as more static filled the air. Gengar and Mismagius expanded their protective Aura around him, but even that couldn't save him from the raw rush of power that burst from the unstable structure.

Talons as thick around as a man's torso ripped into the weakened copper and tore it apart, making room for spiky wings covered in golden feathers, needled at the roots and prickly. Dark, sunken eyes glared down at Ash over a long, sword-like beak. The thing was almost as tall as the cavern and didn't even care that the water gathering around its naked talons sparked with electricity. Lily's Pikachu squeaked in Ash's arms, eyes wide as it stared up at the mythical power that stood before it.

Zapdos, the Thunder Bird, master of the horizon that separates life and death. Ash stared, mouth agape, and fumbled for the Master Ball. When he got a look at it, though, it was burned to a crisp and dented, useless. He swallowed.

"Well, I probably won't need it, anyway. You'll help us stop Lugia, right?"

Overhead, thunder cracked and Zapdos's natural lightning charged, itching to reach the tumultuous skies above. It folded its wings and stepped out of its cage toward Ash. Taloned feet clacked on the stone floor, each nail as long as one of Ash's arms.

He should have screamed, maybe run, something normal to show a proper display of fear and awe at the impossibility standing before him. Just one jab, and Zapdos could impale him with its beak. It could rip him from navel to nose with one of those curved talons without a second thought. But it didn't, and for a few quiet moments that would stay with Ash for the rest of his too-long life, he would wonder if this timeless giant saw in him what he wanted to see in it.

"What's it like to live for so long?"

The words spilled out of him, unbidden, but Zapdos tilted its spiky head and peered down at him. What was that...curiosity? Ash blinked, and despite himself, he laughed. The fearsome Thunder Bird, a myth that inspired fear and humility in the hearts of ordinary men and women, cocked its head, those sunken eyes that had seen nothing but darkness for a thousand years slowly coming to life anew.

He held out a hand, shaking from the pain in his back, and reached for something impossible.

Tyranitar's Earthquake was so well delivered that Lily found herself running for her life from an attack she'd ordered. She stumbled over the ground as it fell away under her feet and tried to run to higher ground. Dust and debris clouded the air and made it impossible to breathe without coughing, and all the while the cataclysm building just out to sea screamed as it grew in magnitude and intensity.

The coordinated aerial attacks delivered by Charizard and Aerodactyl had completely decimated the area where Lance and his two Dragonair had been standing for about fifty feet in all directions, and the blast zone was chewed up and churned out in the wake of the huge Earthquake that had followed. Smoke and dust rose from the broken, charred crater, but the winds quickly dissipated them.

Lily's mouth hung open in horror as the view cleared. "No, that's not possible..."

Lance, not a hair out of place, stood tall in the exact same place he'd been standing when she ambushed him. His two Dragonair flanked him and worked together to power a rippling, milky force field that

completely surrounded the three of them. A Protect shield, and a damn effective one. But those took some time to throw up, certainly not something that could be casually summoned at the last minute, and not to shield against three powerful attacks simultaneously.

Lily pulled herself to her feet as the ground stopped shaking, taking comfort in Tyranitar's shadow just to her left. Lance turned his head toward her, the smirk still curling his lips.

"Now this is a pleasant surprise," he said. "Who are you?"

She wasn't here to talk. In the distance, the storm clouds were beginning to blacken as night's embrace settled over the seascape. Charizard and Aerodactyl were looping back around, ready for another round.

Instead of answering Lance, Lily raised a hand toward the incoming Flyers. "Again!"

Aerodactyl and Charizard powered up another round of attacks.

"Get ready," she said to Tyranitar.

Lance stepped to the side just enough to face her fully as another wave of Hyper Beam and Fire Blast slammed into him. Lily watched as blue flames engulfed the half smile he'd worn since he first laid eyes on her, hating the shudder of relief that ran down her spine at a moment's reprieve from the look.

The destroyed shore exploded around where he and his two Dragonair stood, and the waves turned to steam as they crashed into Charizard's Fire Blast, evaporated on contact.

"Dark Pulse!"

Tyranitar roared and leaked viscous, black smog from underneath its plated scales. A wave of malevolent bloodlust wafted out from it, palpable, and it released the dark energy in a mighty blast. Lily gasped and shielded her face with one arm, while the other reached for her crossbow, already locked and loaded.

He can't keep using Protect successively. Now's our chance!

She took aim and pulled on the weapon's trigger just as the light and smoke began to dissipate and Tyranitar's Dark Pulse washed over Lance and his Dragonair like a wave of black sludge. Hoping she had

Lance's position right in her mind, Lily fired the steel-tipped bolt and jerked from the recoil. Adrenaline pumped her high as a kite as everything, the rocks under her booted feet and the air she sucked in through shallow breaths, felt electrified. Those couple seconds of waiting as the view cleared were the longest of her life. They were crushed when the roiling dark miasma Tyranitar had generated began to swirl and rapidly disperse under the force of a Twister attack. The cyclone, a blur of wind and red, raw energy, drilled a small crater into the already abused beach and dispelled the Dark Pulse and the shattered Protect screens that had reached their limits.

"Whoever you are," Lance said, stepping forward through the deadly Twister without a second thought, "your aim could use work."

He had a shallow gash on his left cheek and a chunk of his left ear missing, the chewed up meat around the wound dripping blood as the lobe hung on by a thin flap of skin. Her crossbow bolt had missed by mere inches.

He wasn't smiling anymore, but the lack of fury, the calm he seemed to project put Lily more on edge than any outrage he could have projected at her. His dark eyes squared on her face, unblinking, unmoving even, like they'd been carved into his skull for show. For the life of her, she could not move as he scrutinized her.

A spark of recognition in those pit-like eyes, and his lips parted slightly, revealing straight, white teeth. "Domadraghi."

Lily said nothing. If she ever doubted Clair, she didn't anymore. This man... She could *smell* the power radiating from him like he secreted the stuff. She suddenly remembered her encounter with the wild Dragonite on the Seafoam Islands, the wonder and awe and deep terror that could only accompany the truly beautiful and the undeniably strange.

He stopped a few yards from her, close enough to hear over the rising storm winds, but far enough away from the threat of Tyranitar drooling through its jaws. His two Dragonair flanked him, but they were visibly worse for wear. The one on his right, its scales like polished rose quartz, was smudged with char marks and bleeding from a gash in its back.

"Who are you?" When he asked her this time, the edge of sarcasm was gone from his tone, replaced with a soft-spoken curiosity that made her skin crawl.

Lily clutched her crossbow in a white-knuckled grip. "I'm here to stop you, Champion Lance. You're about to make a big mistake."

He didn't even react to her declaration. "You know my name. It's only polite to share yours."

A fear she could not name, something primal and impossible to pin down boiled in the pit of her stomach then. It was just him, the sight of him, the pressure in the air, surely. A name...it was just a name. And she needed to think. Stall for time, make sure the next bolt didn't miss.

"I'm Lily Kida, of Cinnabar," she said, hating how her voice shook. "If you stop trying to wake up Lugia, then I'll stop attacking you."

As she'd feared he would, he reacted to her name and sucked in a breath. The edges of his lips stretched into the beginnings of a smile that revealed the sharp points of his incisors, and she hated that she looked. *Stared.*

"Lily...Kida..." He turned her name over, unravelling every syllable over his sharp teeth like a twisted cherry stem. "You're one of mine."

Something about the way he said it, not the words themselves but the time it took to utter them, triggered a kind of vertigo in her heart, like falling and watching the ground rush up to meet her. Fear? No, not entirely. It was something else, something she couldn't name but that a part of her recognized intimately. Next to her Tyranitar seemed to pick up on her mounting discomfort and anger. It crouched and curled back its lips in a snarl.

"So, tell me what you really want," Lance said. "You have my attention."

Lily recoiled. "What? I just told you, I'm here to stop you."

It was Lance's turn to falter in confusion. "...You were serious? But you're one of mine. You're not here to stop me."

"Excuse me? Yes, I *am*, and I'm not *yours*. I'm not anyone's *anything*."

Aerodactyl and Charizard circled overhead, eyes trained on Lily and no doubt awaiting her next command, or for Lance's Dragonair to make a move.

Lance shook his head and again looked her over like he couldn't

believe she was standing in front of him. "Cinnabar, you said... I remember you. I remember the day the Elder reported that your parents had abandoned the clan and stolen you away. With the war winding down, the Elder didn't want to spare anyone to go looking. Your parents were just *skuffs*, too diluted to be Titans despite their lineage. But you... If anyone had guessed you would turn out to be a true Titan, we would have come for you, I promise you that."

"Look, I'm not gonna say it again," Lily said with more confidence than she felt. "Stop this. Team Rocket and the other Elite Four're finished. You're alone here, so just give it up."

"Alone?" He blinked, and suddenly he *changed*. His hand, only half covered by a black bracer, brushed his cut cheek and ear and came away bloody. "But you're here."

I'll take that as a no, she thought to herself, not trusting her voice at the moment.

"You don't know what this is, do you?" He held his hand out, fingers dripping with his blood. "This is my—*our* inheritance. The Dragon Trinity created Time, Space, and the Void, and to fill the emptiness, they created us in their image. Those eons were ours, the time of the Dragons. We ruled as kings and queens, uncontested. I can remember it, the eternal peace, the freedom." He trailed off, lost in a memory that wasn't his, then looked up at her again. "You can remember it, too, if you listen. It's in our blood. The power..." He flexed his bloody fingers toward Lily, and for a mad moment, she did feel it. "It's alive."

She didn't know when she'd dropped the crossbow, but it lay on the ground, discarded. Tyranitar had gone quiet, yellow eyes trained on Lance and haunches coiled to spring at a moment's notice.

"But then, everything changed when the pretenders crawled out of the muck and dared to stand next to us."

He lowered his hand, and Lily let out the breath she didn't know she'd been holding. Fresh air filled her veins and blood rushed to her brain, drawing it out of whatever sluggish limbo it had fallen into.

"After today, none of that will matter anymore," Lance went on. "Things will go back to the way they used to be."

Lily watched his twin Dragonair and wondered how many more Protect shields they had left between them. There would be no hitting Lance directly until they were taken care of.

"I dunno what you mean, but I'm happy with the way things are now. I'm not gonna let you wreck it all."

His gaze softened, but not in a good way. *Pity*, she recognized the same look Clair had bestowed upon her. And it was the final pretense of humanity he offered.

"Then you'll die with the rest." He reached for two Pokéballs at his belt with his good hand. "But I'll do you the honor of a Dragon's death. Even a diluted *fortynblod* like you deserves that much for coming all the way here."

He tossed the two Pokéballs, and they popped open in a flash of light. Aerodactyl and Charizard immediately plummeted to the earth to Lily's side at the new threat and landed with a crash and a snarl.

"Oh no..." Lily whispered.

In the frothing, rip-tide waters, a thirty-foot Gyarados reared up and let its maw hang open, revealing jaws that would make a Feraligatr cower in fear. But on the beach just behind Lance, his Dragonite slowly stood up on its hind legs and got its bearings. A monster of a Dragon at nearly forty feet tall, it spread its massive, blue wings and opened jaws with teeth as long as swords to let out a roar that would haunt Lily's dreams for years to come.

Charizard answered the roar, trembling with rage, and Tyranitar was soon to follow, its scales leaking more tar as its power roiled with a mind of its own. Only Aerodactyl, twice its allies' size but somehow forgettable next to Dragonite, remained silent as it kept its beady eyes trained on the sunburst Dragon.

Gyarados dipped lower into the water, seemingly unfazed by the maelstrom sending the ocean into chaos. Farther off the coast, the enormous whirlpool continued to scream and swirl, gaining mass and momentum with each passing minute.

This is it. I have to end it fast.

Lily snatched her last two Pokéballs and threw them toward the water. Kingdra and Dragonair coalesced among the waves and immediately sank down low under Gyarados's intimidating glare. Lance cast her Dragons barely a passing glance.

"A *fortynblod* who dares to control true Dragons," Lance mused more to himself than to her. His blood fell in thick tracks from his wounded

cheek and pooled at the corner of his mouth as he spoke, but he seemed oblivious to it and to the pain. "Bold. But not good enough."

Lily did not have the time or desire to decipher his cryptic way of speaking. Her best chance now would be to try to move fast and think of a way to get to him directly. But that Dragonite...

She waved her hand. "Tiny, Scaly! Double Dragon Rage!"

Dragonair and Kindgra took off in the water, almost invisible as they blended in with the angry blue, and kicked up a vengeful, crimson wave that they rode together straight for Gyarados.

"Take out that Dragonite!" she shouted.

Charizard had been waiting for that and leaped into the sky, scales flaming as it readied a deadly Blast Burn attack. Aerodactyl was slower taking off, and Dragonite roared again as it watched the comparatively tiny Charizard light up like a firework. Its great wings reached for the sky and in one swoop, they beat the ground and lifted it into the air. Tyranitar was Lily's last line of defense, and it was already powering up a Hyper Beam.

"Aim for the Dragonair!" Lily ordered.

The battle began, and soon Lily was once more running for her life. Kingdra and Dragonair slammed into Gyarados with their double Dragon Rage, and the wave they created drowned the three of them among churning, red waters. But Gyarados was fast and much larger than them, and it was in its element in the water. A Waterfall attack raised the waves in a thick column that sucked up both Kingdra and Dragonair, while Gyarados prepared to strike with a Crunch attack as they were disoriented. Kingdra, surprisingly resilient, pulsed with power and wrested control of the Waterfall attack from Gyarados, sending it back with a vengeance. Gyarados took the attack in the mouth and its head snapped around, giving Dragonair an opening to ram it with a Slam attack.

Charizard, meanwhile, dove for Dragonite as it gained altitude, a flaming Kamikaze, fearless. Dragonite's amber scales radiated a wave of crimson energy as it prepared to unleash an Outrage attack. Charizard tucked its wings in close to its body, aflame, and hit Dragonite in the gut. Fire burst against the hefty Dragon's plated hide and it roared, more in annoyance than pain. But the distraction was just enough time for Aerodactyl to close in.

"Ancient Power!" Lily shouted.

Aerodactyl's shale scales rose up and released an eerie, yellow energy just as the reptile ran smack into Dragonite at the height of its Outrage. Smaller and leaner than Dragonite, Aerodactyl nonetheless attempted to dig its long, taloned feet into Dragonite's still-burning belly. Dragonite snarled as the super-effective attack connected, sharp rocky scales tearing up its wings and neck, but it pushed back.

Aerodactyl squawked as it took the full brunt of Dragonite's Outrage. Crimson light snaked over its body like chains and tore away at its tough scales wherever it touched, slowly ripping it to pieces. Dragonite punched out with its clubbed fists and succeeded in throwing Aerodactyl off it. Lily watched in horror as Aerodactyl plummeted to the ground and crashed. By then, Charizard had made a loop and loosed a terrible stream of fire at Dragonite's back, causing the huge Dragon to snap and roar in pain and fury.

But she didn't have time to worry about them. Tyranitar's Hyper Beam was met with twin Dragon Pulses and caused an explosion that blinded Lily and sent her flying backward. Somewhere in the background, she thought she heard her Dragonair wail in pain, but she couldn't be sure. The smoke was barely clearing and Tyranitar was tearing into Lance's blue Dragonair with a Dragon Claw attack and took equal chunks out of the earth and Dragonair's tail. The pink Dragonair, wounded but determined, fell onto Tyranitar and Wrapped with all its might. Thwarted on all sides, Tyranitar threw back its head and attempted to claw off the pink Dragonair as it slowly asphyxiated it.

Gyarados blasted the ocean with a Hyper Beam of its own, and Lily panicked when she couldn't spot Dragonair and Kingdra through the ensuing geyser.

"Scaly! Tiny!"

Kingdra burst from the churn and blasted a cannon-like Dragon Pulse at almost point-blank range against Gyarados's golden belly, knocking the beast over and cracking the tough scales that protected it.

But there was no relief. Tyranitar roared in agony as the pink Dragonair continued to suffocate it and its twin, recovering from the shock of its wounds, prepared to attack anew.

"Dark Pulse!" Lily shouted.

Tyranitar dug its claws into the pink Dragonair and released a cloud of tar. The Dark Pulse swept in all directions. Lily turned and leaped to safety, but took the edges of the attack in the back and suffered a head injury. Blood ran down her neck, and bruises covered her back through her armor as she fell face-first into the rocky shore. Lance, too, retreated and yanked his heavy cape over his face to shield himself from the effects of the Dark Pulse. The pink Dragonair took the brunt of the attack, though, and screamed. Defeated, it pooled around Tyranitar's feet like limp spaghetti and bled from numerous lacerations, twitching and barely breathing. Lance recalled it.

This is impossible, Lily realized with horror as she clutched a hand to her bloody neck. *I can't concentrate on everything at once!*

As though proving her right, Dragonite, still airborne despite its tattered wings and bleeding belly threw back its head and spat out the most massive Hyper Beam Lily had ever witnessed.

"Kill it!" Lance ordered.

"Rocky!" she screamed.

Aerodactyl, lying in the center of a crater it had created in its fall, had managed to shuffle to its feet and dug its clawed wings into the earth, breathing heavily from the damage it had taken. Blood sloughed from its back where the crimson venom had pierced in between its rock-hard scales, a red cape that dripped all the way down its tail. As Dragonite powered up its Hyper Beam, Aerodactyl, hearing Lily's warning, squawked in fury and dug all four of its appendages into the ruptured earth. Chunks of rock, slabs bigger even than Aerodactyl itself, ripped from the ground and rose in mid air, propelled by ancient power and choler. At that same moment, Charizard swooped toward Dragonair from above, claws poised and trailing red.

The Hyper Beam rocketed toward the earth, and Lily could only watch as Aerodactyl slammed its tail on the ground and kicked up a massive Stone Edge attack to collide with the beam. Charizard, taking advantage of Dragonite's momentary distraction, crash-landed on its back and dug its Dragon Claws into the weak spot between the beast's wings. Dragonite roared in pain, the Hyper Beam snuffed out prematurely, and Aerodactyl managed to crawl out of the line of fire just as the slabs of Stone Edge were crushed under the Hyper Beam's sheer force.

Lance, to his credit, took a moment to marvel at Aerodactyl and

Charizard's teamwork. The debris from the last-minute Stone Edge attack rained down on the beach, and he and Lily both had to crouch and shield themselves from the larger chunks.

Tyranitar felt no such admiration for its fellow pseudo-Dragons and, now free of the bone-crushing Wrap attack, charged full-on toward Lance's remaining Dragonair. The serpentine Pokémon coiled and sprang, its forehead horn leading a Dragon Rush to meet Tyranitar head-on.

"Swerve and Crunch!" Lily shouted as the saw the double-suicide unfolding.

By some miracle, Tyranitar heard her command and swerved its trajectory at the last minute. Meaty claws reached for Dragonair as its head just barely grazed Tyranitar's shoulder and blasted a chunk of its plated armor clean off. But the green dinosaur lived up to its reputation for insolence and only leaned into the pain. Its jagged nails ripped into Dragonair, slowing it down just long enough for Tyranitar to Crunch into its middle. Dragonair howled, its death rattle as beautiful as it was torturous, and writhed in Tyranitar's grip.

Tyranitar sank to the ground and slammed its snout into the earth, crushing Dragonair's spine in the process and biting down even harder. Black, tar-like energy seeped from between Tyranitar's jaws and spilled over Dragonair's sapphire scales like a poison. The Dragon cried out again, weaker, and Lance finally noticed what had happened. Lily watched as his dark eyes widened in shock, and together they looked on in vain as Tyranitar yanked its head back and pulled out a foot and a half of Dragonair's bloody, turquoise spine in between its jaws.

Meanwhile, Lily's Dragonair was in the process of whamming Gyarados with a Dragon Tail that went awry when Gyarados blasted it with a Hydro Pump and sent it crashing into the rocky beach. Bleeding and in shock, Dragonair struggled to get its bearings. Horrified and propelled entirely by adrenaline, Lily ran for the beach just as Gyarados was resituating itself for another Hydro Pump that would turn Dragonair into mince meat if it stayed splayed on the jagged shore.

And then, out of nowhere, Kingdra reared up and raised a boiling typhoon along with it. The Scald attack slammed into Gyarados's open mouth with a vengeance, cooking the flesh of its cheeks, tongue and throat as it nearly drowned the water Dragon.

Seeing a chance, Lily called out, "Hurry Scaly, Dragon Pulse!"

Kingdra drew on whatever reserves remained to it and shot a glowing, red cannonball of draconian energy directly at Gyarados's abused mouth.

"Crunch!" Lance bit out, seeing what Lily was doing.

"No!"

But it was too late. Gyarados swallowed both Kingdra's final Dragon Pulse and Kingdra itself. The fat serpent's jowls shook and smoked from its severe burn and the implosion of the Dragon Pulse attack, but they closed around Kindgra's torso and held on. The last sight Lily witnessed was the brilliant, red blood splatter against Gyarados's blistering lips as it crashed into the waves and drowned.

For a few moments, she just stared at the frothing waters, amber eyes wide with disbelief and her Dragonair slowly reorienting itself with its surroundings. The waters, eddying and breaking in erratic waves, carried a red cloud that expanded and slowly dissipated as Gyarados and Kingdra sank into the rip tide. They didn't resurface.

She couldn't even cry. She could not *believe*. One minute Kingdra was there, the rock of her team, the strongest of them all, and the next...

A searing vise clamped around her throat, which was slick with the blood from her earlier head injury, and pulled. It pulled her very soul out, ripped her apart from the inside. And suddenly, it was all real. Clair's warning, Lance's promise, the truth of this place—

"*Human?"*

Clair's taunt, full of pity, drowned out Dragonair's melancholic song next to her.

Dragonite, slumped over but very much still in the game, landed behind Lance and leaned over him now that his Dragonair were indisposed or dead. A tenuous calm had settled over the beach even as Lugia's summon whirlpool continued to engorge just offshore. Lily could not tear her eyes from the fast fading bloodspill that marked the only thing left in this world of Kingdra.

"You're trying my patience, girl," Lance said, an edge to his tone that had not been there before. "Gyarados was one of my best."

The fury and despair that had been bubbling up within Lily possessed her now like a demon, and she whipped around to find Lance a safe distance away under the aegis of his Dragonite. Tears stung her eyes and her teeth were bared.

"Scaly was *my* best! And he was so much more than that! How *dare* you talk about it like their lives're just numbers?"

Lance studied her, but his statuesque expression hardly changed. She could feel his dark gaze on her, heavy like the weight of the world. "The blood doesn't lie. Gyarados was strong, but it was no true Dragon. Your Kingdra fought well. You should be proud. Only a true Titan could have commanded that kind of loyalty."

"Just shut up about blood! I'm sick of it! I don't *care*!" She was on her feet now, the tears falling freely as she stubbornly wiped them away with her sleeve. "What the hell is wrong with you? Don't you feel anything? Gyarados just gave its life for you!"

To her horror, Lance stepped closer. "Of course I feel. I feel just as you do." He clenched his fists and sucked in a greedy breath, savoring it. "I feel it ardently. Look around! This is the beginning of our era. Once I purge the world of the so-called Tamers, we'll live in peace again."

Lily went white as a sheet. "What're you talking about?"

"This." He gestured to the raging whirlpool not far off. "With Lugia's help, I'll rid the world of all Tamers, the pretenders who've used Pokémon and people to wage wars and commit unspeakable atrocities against nature. Without them, we can return this land to a time when Dragons ruled unfettered."

"Th-that's genocide... It's crazy, you can't possibly!"

"Can't? Of course I can. I'm the *only* one worthy enough to bear this burden. Look at what mankind has accomplished these past millennia thanks to the Tamers. War, famine, avarice... If it's genocide you want, look no further than here on Shamouti. This place used to be the capital of a great civilization, and now? It's nothing but a pile of rocks, forgotten. The Tamers, in all their self-aggrandized wisdom and power, have done nothing but feed their own hubris and drive mankind deeper into depravity."

Lily shook her head. "No, you're wrong. Evil isn't human nature, it's a choice."

"Is it? Look at the Magi, the so-called greatest Tamers to have ever lived with power comparable even to ours. All dead, driven to madness and suicide. Their inborn corruption drove them to murder everyone around them, starting with the ones they loved most. Every last one of them, fallen victim to the power foisted upon them that they never deserved. Why should the others be any different?"

There was a part of her, a small but vocal part, that understood. Empathized. She was a scientist, not a warrior, and beyond a certain level she would probably never understand why people fought amongst themselves. Surely there had to be a better way, a compromise, anything to avoid needless bloodshed. But people did not always see eye to eye, and many times they did not see anything beyond their own egos. *How dare you not see the world as I do?* What a tempting notion, so easy and so right. Lance was not wrong. But no one was perfect.

"Because *I'm* different," she said. "I came here to stop you because I'm the one who created the Silver Wing. I have to stop you. I have to fix my mistake. If I can do it, then so can others."

"You..." He brushed his bloody hand over the bent Silver Wing tucked securely in his belt by his hip and smeared red over its silvery fronds. "The scientist from Cinnabar... Of course, it couldn't be any other way. It all comes back to us. You're truly..." He laughed to himself. "You're no mere *fortynblod*. You're a Titan for true. Just like me."

Lily's vision blurred with tears as his words struck a chord somewhere in the depths of her heart that filled her with quiet melancholy and longing.

"*I want to be believed in."*

Lance the Dragonmaster, the Champion of two continents, perhaps the strongest person in mind and body she would ever know, had no idea what he had just done.

Dragonair was recovered enough to shift and snake its tapering tail around Lily in a protective gesture. Tyranitar, Aerodactyl, and Charizard remained some distance away near the crater Aerodactyl had fallen into, but Dragonite, wounded as it was, kept them at bay in a temporary standoff.

Lance reached out his bloody hand to her again, but this time in offering. "You could stay with me," he said. "Stay, and you'll understand a little of what I mean."

He was achingly beautiful like that, reaching for her, *asking*. Asking for something in return for the one thing she wanted most. She didn't think much of it before, but it was agony now that she saw it.

"*His control... It's a power like nothing our clan has ever seen.*"

He could do it, wipe out the part of the human race he deemed a blight on the environment and create a new world. If anyone could do it, he could. She felt it in her veins in the blood they shared. Just as she felt the pull of him, something beyond comprehension, beyond the logic and reason with which she so carefully armored herself. He stripped it away with a soft, entreating command. And for a transient moment of black despair, she wished it didn't have to be him.

"I can't," Lily said, surprised at how stubborn the words were in the back of her throat, fighting to stay hidden. "I won't. I'm not like you. I'll never understand it. I don't want to."

Lance let his hand fall, and the moment of silence that stretched between them was the saddest of her life. Something had broken here, lost perhaps forever, for both of them.

"You don't understand?" He said finally, eyeing her Dragonair.

Something about the way he looked at Dragonair ignited a fight or flight reaction, and the fear that had gotten her this far reared its ugly head again. Lance's predatory gaze swept over her and up the coast, past his Dragonite, where Aerodactyl, Charizard, and Tyranitar clustered together.

He lifted his bloody hand again, but this time directed it at the trio of borrowed pseudo-Dragons. Incomprehensible panic squeezed Lily's stomach.

"S-Stop," she said. "What're you doing?"

"Helping you understand."

Dragonite stepped back so Lance had a clear view of the trio. Tyranitar lowered its head and snarled, while Aerodactyl's lash-like tail sliced the air overhead. Blood dripped from Lance's spread fingers as he held the three Pokémon in his sights.

Charizard roared and took off in a low sweep directly at Lance, embers spewing from its jaws as it powered up a Flamethrower attack. But Lance didn't budge as Charizard closed the distance, defiant, and

opened its mouth to blast him. Thirty yards, twenty, five...

"Stop," Lance said forcefully.

And against all odds, Charizard stopped. Its thick, hind legs skidded in the rocky coast and its blue wings puffed out to catch the reverse draft. It clamped its mouth shut and swallowed the fire it had begun to kindle deep in its belly.

Two feet from Lance's outstretched hand, Charizard heaved and snorted through its sawed-off nostrils, eyes wide and livid, but it didn't move. Lance slowly turned to look at Lily over his shoulder and swept his hand around in a lazy arc. She tugged on Dragonair's neck, legs stumbling backwards toward the water, careless of the deadly whirlpools that lurked therein, and gaped in horror at the realization of her deepest fears coming into this battle.

"Kill her," Lance commanded without remorse.

Charizard roared again, a mad cry that unleashed the full force of its fury and jumped into the air. It breathed deep, belly swelling, and spat out a hot stream of orange fire at the jagged coast.

This time, it was coming for Lily.

She didn't have time to scream. Dragonair dived with her into the sea just as the Flamethrower signed her ponytail and superheated the backs of her legs and feet through her armor. Gushing water filled her mouth and stole her screams, drowned her ears of all sound but the thunderous roar of the waves.

Her legs screamed in pain as the salt and freezing water washed out the heat of Charizard's fire, but all she could do was hang onto Dragonair. The currents were merciless, but she had to beat them and get to the surface. Opening her eyes to the stabbing pain of salt, this time she did scream as she caught a glimpse of Gyarados's broken body sunken far below, dashed on the sharp rocks. It mouth was split wide and black with death. In her shock and sudden terror, Lily lost her grip on Dragonair and the currents smashed her against the shallows. Sharp coral and rock stabbed her in the back, though her armor held fast against most of it. Over the roaring waters, she could almost hear her bones breaking and muscles bruising. Gagging, she swallowed a mouthful of seawater and tasted the first moment of drowning.

The black ocean reached for her from below, and she clawed and

scraped at the currents in the direction she thought was up. Another breath of water filled her mouth and turned to acid in her lungs. Tears fell from her eyes, but they only added to the sting and were swept away with the tide. Not even they would comfort her here. Another rip tide slammed into her, and she bashed the side of her head on something hard and rough. Dazed, her vision doubled and her hands ached from the futile climb to the surface. The dark ocean opened up below her as it did so often in her dreams. Only this time, Ivy wasn't here to wake her up.

She reached out from the edges of consciousness into darkness, searching for a hand to pull her up.

"*I gotcha!*" Ash would say as he saved her, like he always did.

She closed her fingers around nothing but frigid water, and only the depths filled her ears with false promises of salvation.

29. Shamouti Island, Part 3

Triumvirate, chapter 29: Shamouti Island, Part 3
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Cold water filled the space between Lily's grasping fingers as she reached for something that wasn't there. Out of air, out of time, out of hope, the dark ocean pulled her deeper toward Gyarados's smashed corpse. No one was coming, and she was alone as she'd always feared she'd be.

"*Alone?"* Lance's voice was as clear over the rushing water as ever. *"But* you're *here."*

She could imagine him looking down at her over his nose, the stars far away behind him, none able to outshine that pull of him even as she sank deeper into the abyss. The villain watching the hero fall.

I'm no hero.

Kingdra was dead because of her. Charizard, Tyranitar, and Aerodactyl were lost under his spell. People love to dream about a hero, a Chosen One who stands above the rest, ordained by fate and proven from birth. But Lily chose this for herself. The darkness, the cold, the water thirsty for the blood that meant nothing to her—all indifferent. They could have had anyone and been satisfied. Gyarados was no true Dragon, but it chose to fight, too.

Then why?

Why would he ask? Why would he offer? Why would he choose...

"*You could stay with me."*

The water filled her lungs to the point of bursting, the pain insurmountable and the pressure in her head building. No time for silly questions, no time to be a hero.

"*There* is *such a thing as heroes!"*

She could have cried if the sea didn't steal even her tears from her.

"*They're the ones that're the most scared, and they still stand up and fight."*

Alone here, the pressure suffocating and the water demonic as it stole

what little remained to her. Alone, save for Lance.

"*You could stay...*"

Lily screamed from a place so far gone and deep she couldn't have known it existed inside her. No air, no light, and the scream flooded her body with a will to live that she hardly knew she possessed. Her hand reached up, grasped for anything at all to hang onto, to salvage what was left, and her freezing fingers scraped against something slick and firm.

Heroes are the ones who choose to be heroes for themselves, not because it's meant to be.

Emboldened, she stretched as far as her fingers could reach. The solid form scraped against her hand and drifted closer, so she could wrap her arm around it. Long and lithe, it curled around her waist, under a leg, and cut her fingers against its smooth sharpness. Two of her nails ripped clean off against what felt like small razors packed tightly together in a sheet of sharpness, the pain immediate and vicious, but the implosion in her chest from lack of air drowned it out and she dug her ruined fingers deeper into the lifeline.

Water rushed past her ears, yanked her head back, but she closed her eyes and curled up, desperate to be anywhere but here. Breaking the surface was an underwhelming achievement. The howling winds and sea spray made little difference from the depths that had pulled her under. Except that she was no longer drowning. Except that she coughed up half a gallon of water as something dragged her over the coral-laden shoals, her knees and shins scraping the bottom but protected by her armor. Except that she was alive.

Pebbles dug into her cheek as she was tossed onto the shore to cough up a lung and possibly pop her eyes out at the rate she was going. Lily curled into herself and fisted a handful of smooth sea pebbles just to hold onto something. Tears washed out her eyes, which were red and burning from the overload of salt. *Except she was alive.*

"I'm—"

She coughed, unable to get the words past her raw throat. Something shaded her vision, smooth and sleek and sapphire blue. Dragonair curled around her, head low as its dark eyes surveyed the shoreline. It bled from various small lacerations in its razor blade hide, but it seemed unperturbed. Lily choked on seawater and a particularly nasty hiccup as she reached for the serpentine Dragon.

"Ti...Tiny..."

Dragonair hummed a long, soulful note close to her aching head. Thunder boomed in the sky above and a flash of lightning blinded her. The world had moved on without her, however long she'd drowned for and missed its passing. And no one was here to pick her up but herself.

"Ah," she gasped as she tried to push herself up on an elbow. Her back screamed in protest, and she guessed she must have cracked a few ribs. Breathing was torture even compared to the watery grave Dragonair had pulled her from. But she was alive, breathing, and she wasn't finished here yet.

A roar, Tyranitar by the sound of it, resonated not far from here. Cold panic filled the cracks in her bones and helped her find the strength to stagger to her feet. Dragonair was by her side, alert and gazing toward the western end of the crescent island.

"Oh, shit," she swore.

It was Tyranitar, all right. And it had spotted her and alerted the others. Aerodactyl, dripping blood from its back like a leaky faucet, squawked and attempted to leap into the air to fly at her. Charizard threw back its head and roared, unhappy that she'd deprived it of its kill earlier. Lance stood behind them with Dragonite, though she couldn't make out his face this far away.

"Tiny, move!"

Dragonair slithered around her, and Lily threw her arms around its torso and held on as best she could. The ground exploded just as they dashed away, Tyranitar's Hyper Beam just narrowly missing them. For a water Dragon, Dragonair moved with surprising celerity over land. But it wouldn't be good enough.

"Stone Edge!" Lance's voice cut through the storm winds.

Aerodactyl and Tyranitar combined their power and literally rearranged the face of the earth under Lily and Dragonair. Slabs of stone crunched and punched up from below, slamming into Dragonair and smacking Lily in her already abused sides and back. The earth opened up to swallow them, and they were falling.

"Tiny!" she screamed.

Dragonair, wounded but unwilling to give up, stretched the fin-like wings on the sides of its head. The winds shifted around them, and they began to rise upon a warm updraft summoned out of nowhere. Lily's feet dangled as she held on, arms wrapped tightly around Dragonair's middle. Below, the ground split and caved in on itself, allowing the sea to overtake it with a vengeance.

Dragonair soared through the air, sparing both Lily and itself the worst of the deadly Stone Edge attacks, but up in the air they faced a new kind of vulnerability as Lance's cold gaze settled over them.

"Charizard!" he called to Ash's Charizard. "Finish them!"

Charizard took off toward Lily and Dragonair at full tilt, its scales shimmering with heat as flames leaped across its entire body. The Blast Burn would incinerate Lily on contact if the impact didn't kill her first, and Dragonair was slow moving in the air.

The air began to warm as Charizard sped closer and closer, the fire overtaking its wings and sending sun flares to the ground with each flap. It opened its mouth and began coughing up a ball of fire to incinerate her.

Lily held onto Dragonair, helpless, and her eyes watered in fear and anger. Not for Lance and what he'd done, but for Charizard. The most stubborn, headstrong Pokémon she knew, and it had fallen under Lance's suffocating control without so much as a fight. Her bleeding fingers curled around Dragonair's belly as she fought to keep her head held high in the air and face Charizard.

"You coward!" she spat as Charizard zoomed ever closer. "You let Lance control you because you're weak! You know me, Charizard!"

Charizard roared, and the fire in its mouth roiled as it gathered energy. Lily's tears were carried off in the whipping winds and took the last vestiges of hope with them. There was only the fury left, and goddamnit Charizard was going to feel the heat of it like no one ever had.

"I'm ashamed of you!" She reached out for Charizard with a bloody hand, half the fingernails ripped from their beds. "Ash would be ashamed of you! You *coward*!"

Dragonair soared higher, and Charizard closed the distance, aflame. Lily screamed with all her might, the demon that had tried to drown her exorcised from her raw lungs, no longer welcome. It was over

now, what was the point? She wouldn't let it win, no way. If this was what it came to, then so be it.

Charizard threw its head back, and she turned her head but dared not close her eyes, expecting the burn any minute now. But it never came. Charizard snorted and jerked in mid air, as though possessed, and the flames licking its body dissipated with an exhale. Black smoke puffed from its gaping maw, the fire snuffed out, and sulfur stung Lily's nose and eyes. Blinking, confused, she looked beyond her outstretched hand toward Charizard.

"What?"

Charizard snarled and angled its trajectory to pull up beside Dragonair and ride the mystical updraft it had summoned. A lone, yellow eye caught Lily's gaze, wide and dilated.

"...Charizard?"

It angled low to drift just below Dragonair. Lily could hardly think straight at the sudden turn of events. She wasn't burning to her death, and Charizard's bare back waited below in invitation. Swallowing and shaking, she loosened her death grip around Dragonair and let go.

"*Titans are notoriously duplicitous."*

What of Dragons?

It was the singular most terrifying moment of the entire battle. A trick? A new torture Lance had dreamed up just to watch her writhe? Charizard, *Ash's* Charizard...

Something warm hit her stomach and chest, tough but molding to her form. She scrambled to hang on, and Charizard lifted its neck a bit to give her something to hold onto. Sturdy wings beat the winds and swerved higher, leaving Dragonair below to follow. Lily choked on a sob.

"Is that really you?"

Charizard roared, and she could feel its fury echoing the ghost of hers. A single, yellow eye caught her gaze over its shoulder as it dipped along a harsh gale, and she could have laughed if her throat wasn't raw from drowning. Overcome with emotion, Lily hugged the pseudo-Dragon around its neck and held on with everything she had, shaking as a fresh sob racked her body. She smiled through her tears.

Charizard was back, somehow, some way, and it was pissed. Aerodactyl, still under Lance's influence, squawked and readied a fresh Hyper Beam. Charizard roared in defiance and spat out a vicious Flamethrower at its long-time ally. Below, the rocky shore turned red with heat in the Flamethrower's path, and Aerodactyl swallowed its Hyper Beam and scrambled out of the way. Lily sat up and watched, a triumphant smile on her lips.

"Yeah, Charizard!"

Tyranitar raised its fists at the circling orange reptile and began to power up a Dark Pulse that would cut through whatever fire Charizard threw at it. Lily patted Charizard's neck.

"Dive!"

Charizard dived, and the black energy ripped past it, barely grazing its underbelly and Lily's left leg, which was already in enough pain from the earlier burn she'd suffered. Tyranitar watched them swoop, a little surprised, and Lily gritted her teeth against the hope blooming in her heart. If she could sway Charizard back to her side, then she could reach Aerodactyl and Tyranitar, surely...

"Dragonite!" Lance shouted. "Tear it apart!"

His voice drew Lily's attention, and a spike of dread killed whatever hope she'd been nursing at the look on his face. Livid, like she'd never seen or imagined him. Gone was the practiced façade, the air of serene psychosis, and in its place was a fury so acute it could have squeezed water from solid rock.

Dragonite was moving, Lily was reeling from the fury Lance was projecting, and in the course of just a couple seconds, she was free falling. Her bleeding head snapped back, blinding her in a daze for a moment—Charizard had bucked her off as it pulled up at a harsh angle to meet Dragonite. Its scales flooded with fire again and it opened its mouth in a roar, but Dragonite reared up above it, more than three times its size, insurmountable. Lily fell, arms outstretched and eyes wide as she tried to comprehend what she was seeing, what Charizard had done.

Dragonite's jowls shook as it sucked in a breath and opened its maw, those teeth as long as swords slick with saliva. Charizard spat out a thick column of fire directly at Dragonite, but the huge Dragon brought its maw down on its smaller descendant and closed down.

"No!"

Lily screamed and tasted blood in the back of her throat, and before she could get out her breath, something rammed her from behind. Dragonair slithered around her in mid air and caught her as she fell. Desperate, Lily reached a hand out for Charizard just as Dragonite closed its massive jaws around Charizard's neck and shoulders, bringing them both down to the ground.

They landed with a crash, both Dragonite and Lily on her Dragonair, and she skidded in the rocks while holding onto Dragonair. An awful screeching, like nails on a chalkboard, escaped Charizard's twisted mouth as blood spurted in between its teeth where fire should have been. Lily struggled to get to her feet, and Dragonite brought its trunk-like hind leg down on Charizard's lower half, smashing it against the coast completely. With a hungry snarl, Dragonite yanked its head back and ripped Charizard clean in half at the belly.

Blood splashed across Lily's face, hot, but her body didn't react to shield herself, numb with horror. Dragonite threw back its head and wolfed down the top half of Charizard's broken body, crunching bones and razor-sharp scales like they were nothing but potato chips. Its huge foot smothered a growing puddle of blood where Charizard's lower half had been dashed to smithereens.

Her breaths came in short, shallow spurts, each one a punch to the larynx that built upon the next until her shaking became full bodied and she fell to her knees, not even feeling the tremor of pain that bloomed in her legs when she hit the ground. There wasn't even enough air to manage a proper sob. There was just the sticky, red slush that stretched between Dragonite's foot and the ground as it took a step to get away from the muck. Tears streamed down her face with nowhere else to go, carrying Charizard's still-warm blood spatter with them, and she sat there on her knees in quaking silence, unable to process what she'd just witnessed.

It began to rain, slowly at first, but it picked up. Fat, heavy drops, soaking and cold, they washed away the heat of Charizard's blood spatter on her face and buried it between the cracks in the ground below.

Something firm and frigid gripped her chin and yanked it around. Lance dug his fingernails into her cheeks and broke the skin. The shallow cuts stung as her tears pooled around them, and her wide, amber eyes found his mere inches from hers, down on one knee. The

unadulterated rage he'd let slip earlier had dulled to a controlled simmer. She didn't have the focus of mind even to push him away, and she just stared.

A thumb, bare and wet with the rain and his own blood, dragged over her lower lip and smeared it with a metallic sheen. Coppery to the taste, a little salty, a little bitter. His dark eyes, perhaps more alive with actual feeling now than they'd ever been before, searched hers for something he couldn't find but desperately needed to see.

"You're one hell of a girl," he said. "But even you can't stop this. So stop resisting me."

This close, she could feel his breath against her face, warm like anybody else's and misting in the rain, and it triggered something within her, something that had grabbed ahold of her in that dark ocean, drowning and damned. Blood wouldn't save her, Ash wouldn't catch her, and even the best wasn't enough. She was alone out here, alone to choose and to suffer the consequences.

"*Alone?"* Lance's laugh buried in that one word cut like a sword to the gut. *"But* you're *here."*

Breaking through the surface of the dark waters of her mind, Lily blinked and remembered herself. The pain, the despair, the incredulity that one man could bring her to her knees as Lance had all dissolved into the background, suppressed, as she channeled every ounce of rage and hatred—for him, for herself, for this whole clusterfuck of a situation—into her left hand and swung.

The slap hit Lance hard in his bloody cheek, smearing his blood over her palm and snapping his head around forty-five degrees. He released her in the shock, and she sucked in a much-needed breath, eyes livid as they trained on his profile. A bloody handprint where she'd struck him glistened and began to melt in the rain.

"Why is that the only way you can see the world?" she shouted through her tears.

Slowly, his dark eye shifted to see her and his head turned to follow. The rain slipped down his sharply angled cheeks and neck, leaving thick river paths in its wake. Panting heavily through gritted teeth, Lily glared back at him, for the first time unafraid of him and what he might do next.

They held that moment, in reality just a handful of seconds, but

seconds enough to hesitate. Seconds enough to strike, but neither moved.

A mighty roar and a blast of wind and water slammed into them all of a sudden, and they fell apart, skidding across the ground. Lily grunted in pain as she hit her chin on the ground and scraped it up. Dragonair was by her side in a flash and curling protectively around her, while Lance had rolled to a stop a short distance away. Dragonite hunkered down on its haunches and bared its bloody teeth at the sea, where the huge whirlpool continued to spin and call the rain. Within its depths, two huge fog lights shone through the ripping winds and waves, blinking like eyes.

"Lugia," Lance said, struggling to his feet, Lily all but forgotten as he turned his focus on the behemoth within the whirlpool. "I'm here! Lugia!"

Silvery wings, webbed and glossy with sea spray, speared the edges of the whirlpool more than a hundred feet across. The whirlpool wailed as it was sliced open from the inside, its frothing, grey waters parting like skin stretched to the breaking point. White eyes, bright with an inner glow, swept over Shamouti's coast and zeroed in on Lance. They were pupil-less and blind, useless at the depth of the ocean where no light dared penetrate, but nonetheless they concealed an omniscient sight far beyond the capabilities of traditional, light-sensitive eyes. Its coat, covered in primitive feathers identical to the one Lily had recreated, was slick with seawater and shed a silvery mist.

Lance reached for the bird, which hovered within the remains of the collapsing whirlpool that had birthed it suspended by a mystical force, its wings all but superfluous. "Lugia!" he shouted up at it. "I summoned you here! I freed you from your eternal slumber!"

Lugia's beak, more reptilian than avian, hung open and revealed sharp teeth. This was no ordinary bird, Lily could not help but think as she stared up at it, still trying to believe what she was seeing. A sea monster, perhaps. Or descended from one.

A full-bodied rush of terror inundated Lily with adrenaline and a new kind of fear. This thing, Lugia, the so-called King of the Nine Oceans...

It's a Dragon descendant!

Dragonair hummed a low and mournful note, wary of the strange, new power supercharging the air and influencing the will of the rain. That was it, that was his plan. She hadn't quite believed it before, but

after what he'd done to Charizard...

Lance reached for Lugia with his hand, and it watched him with something akin to hungry interest, but it didn't try to attack him.

"Oh my god, he really can control it," Lily said.

Lightning flashed and thunder cracked directly above, as though the storm itself were a living creature also waiting to do Lance's bidding. Lightning flashed again, brighter this time, but it didn't let up. The grey sky split with a vein of lightning that continued to spark, unnaturally sustained, and Lily squinted up at it. She'd never seen anything like it before.

Lugia seemed to snap out of whatever trance Lance had lulled it into and let out a piercing roar. It twisted its long neck around to search the heavens, and Lily followed its gaze. The interminable lightning bolt engorged and arced like a whip toward the coast. Lugia flapped its massive wings and kicked up a geyser of water beneath it just as it barrel rolled out of the bolt's path. The bay exploded with static electricity and steam as though a hail of fireworks had gone off just below the surface, and Lily shielded her eyes from the fantastical display.

A shrieking squawk cut through the air and rumbled like true thunder in the wake of the brilliant lightning show. A giant, yellow bird dove from the storm clouds above, significantly smaller than Lugia but no less impressive in its freak entrance, and squawked again. Beyond the spiky mane of feathers at its neck, a dark figure swathed in violet smoke held on and shouted something.

"Hey! Up here you ugly, overgrown Pidove!"

Ash's voice drew Lily out of her petrified stupor, and she got to her feet and wiped her soaked bangs from her eyes. Lugia roared as it set its sights on Zapdos, but the Thunder Bird was undeterred and began to spark.

"He did it," Lily said, voice trembling with the compounded effects of her back-breaking battle with Lance and the ghost of hope that, despite the brutality of the last several moments, dared to look for an excuse to come up for air.

Another piercing squawk echoed Zapdos, and in a flash of light that could have rivaled the Thunder Bird's brightest lightning strike, Moltres burst from the volcano on Fire Island. Lava spurted like blood

from a severed artery and shot the huge Fire Bird through the air, each flap of its wings shedding a sun flare that literally set fire to the falling rain. Gary, steady as ever, balanced on Moltres's back with Alakazam seated just behind him.

Lugia gained altitude as it clawed at the dark sky with its sights set on the two birds that dared to challenge it, but all of a sudden it roared in pain as the very rains it commanded turned against it. A billion droplets turned to ice and sliced into Lugia's thick hide, each one a small but vicious cut that would have surely dropped even Lance's Dragonite had it suffered the hit.

Silent as death, Articuno flew far above where is glossy, black coat blended in perfectly with the storm clouds, save for the sapphire sheen that glistened off it as it swooped. Rain crusted to hail in its path and sharpened to deadly icicles with each flap of its ominous wings. Ivy, equally silent, had one hand fisted in Articuno's frigid feathers and another around Wigglytuff as it scrambled onto her back.

"They did it!" Lily said, daring to stoke the fledgling fires of hope that grew within her.

"No!" Lance shouted, taking stock of the three legendary birds come to send Lugia back to its watery grave. "You won't get in my way! Lugia, destroy them!"

Lugia didn't need much prompting. The bay waters bubbled under its power, and a whirlpool began to rise off the surface as Lugia roared again and flew skyward to meet its smaller counterparts.

Pika and ChuChu dug their tiny claws into Zapdos's static-charged mane as they perched on its head in front of Ash and the Ghosts that cloaked him. The beach was totally destroyed, from what he could see, but he spotted Lily and her Dragonair far below, watching him. Still alive, he realized with a surge of relief. Lance was down there somewhere, too, but the Champion wasn't his concern.

If confronting Zapdos had been humbling, coming face to face with Lugia was downright emasculating. The creature was like something out of a child's nightmare, ghoulish and pale as death. Even the air around it seemed to teem with a fear that was older than time, the kind no amount of self-confidence or experience or delusion can shield against. Ash felt it now, and even Gengar couldn't muster a defiant cackle. No whispers, no haunted voices in his head. Dead silence.

Even the Ghosts were scared.

"Fuck me," he whispered to himself.

Thankfully, he had a Thunder Bird with legendary accuracy on his side and two plucky Pikachu to watch its back.

Lugia's cry of pain startled Ash, and he watched as the rain assumed a life of its own and ripped into Lugia as a billion tiny knives, frozen to ice. A cold front made Zapdos twitch angrily, and they both looked up to see Ivy riding what in any other circumstance could have passed for a black wraith sent from the depths of hell just to scare the living shit out of Ash.

"Ivy!" he shouted.

Articuno dived and fixed a red eye on Ash and Zapdos as it leveled with them.

"I didn't die this time!" she shouted back.

Despite himself, Ash laughed. Poor Wigglytuff looked about ready to have an aneurysm as it clung to Ivy's shoulders and hair.

Lugia, having survived Articuno's blistering Icy Wind, roared—yes, *roared* like no bird ought to—and raised the sea with it as it hurtled straight for Ash and Ivy. The whites of its eyes, blind, nevertheless seemed to pick out the heart of Ash and dismantle it completely.

A flash of light and a burst of heat sent both Zapdos and Articuno into a steep swerve and cut Lugia off momentarily. The fiery blast rebuffed the huge sea bird just long enough for Zapdos and Articuno to get a safe distance away. Moltres swooped past with Gary at the helm, his eyes as pale as Lugia's and his hand out to sustain the shield of fire with Alakazam's help. As though feeling Ash's eyes on him, he whipped his head around.

"It's a Psychic! Keep your distance!"

Way ahead of you, Ash thought to himself.

The giant whirlpool Lugia had raised from the ocean soon blasted through the fire shield and snuffed it effortlessly, but it kept coming after Moltres. The Fire Bird squawked and picked up speed as it tried to outrun the whirlpool.

"Shit, Zapdos!"

Propelled by monstrous telekinetic powers, Lugia's whirlpool opened up and attempted to swallow Moltres whole. Alakazam threw up a Barrier, but it wasn't enough to evade the enchanted water. Moltres squawked, more angry than afraid, and went up in flames, consuming Gary along with it.

"Ice Beam!" Ivy shouted.

Articuno fired off an intense, icy bolt directly at the whirlpool that began to freeze the rising water on contact. Like a poison, the ice spread faster and faster and the eddying waters slowed to a slushy crawl, but not before they closed around Moltres and Gary. Lugia swooped toward Articuno, its body leaving a trail of silvery mist, and pulsed with Psychic energy. The frozen whirlpool erupted with fresh growths, deadly ice spears that grew with the rapacious urgency of weeds, hydra-like as they raced after the fast-retreating Articuno.

"No you don't," Ash growled. "Thunderbolt!"

The two Pikachu crouched low on Zapdos's head and lifted their tails high, catching the lightning from the storm above. Zapdos charged up power through them, and Ash's Ghosts did their best to stave off the worst of the static and keep Ash from getting electrocuted at point-blank range. When it was ready just seconds later, Zapdos stretched its wings and exploded with raw electricity. The thick Thunderbolt jumped toward the snaking ice columns and ran along them toward Lugia itself. There was a delayed reaction as the ice whined and finally burst under the lightning's power.

Lugia sensed the attack, however, and threw up a Safeguard at the last minute that completely absorbed the lightning, leaving it virtually unharmed. In its distraction, however, Ivy and Articuno managed to fly just out of range and fade to near invisible against the backdrop of the dark clouds.

Meanwhile, the frozen trunk of the whirlpool Lugia had summoned began to glow orange, and steam rose from the surface. The pressure built up, and it was all Ash could do to pull Zapdos in the other direction before the ice and slush burst under the force of the fiery Overheat attack Moltres had released from within. Chunks of ice burned as they fell to the ocean below and superheated the air.

"Now I've seen everything," Ash said, eyes wide as he watched Gary emerge on Moltres from the inferno, somehow having survived the

molten temperatures thanks to the bird.

But Lugia was not done. With an almighty roar, it spread its webbed wings and raised the ocean again at the behest of its colossal Psychic energy—this time, the entire bay rose to do its bidding. A hundred whirlpools, thin water spouts with a mind of their own, attacked like cobras springing on their unsuspecting prey, egged on by the snake charmer's seductive music.

"Ash! Get the hell outta there!" Gary shouted as he and Moltres climbed higher toward the storm clouds.

Zapdos reacted faster than Ash and took to the heavens with a mighty beat of static wings, yellow on black. The Thunder Bird squawked at its brethren, communicating in a language beyond Ash and the others. Driven by telekinetic energy, the many whirlpools rushed after the fleeing birds. Gritting his teeth, Ash looked back over his shoulder. They were upon him, rising ever faster, and he felt the beginning pull of enchanted water at his heels, a vortex of wind and water and a power far beyond him. Gengar and Mismagius whispered in his ear and drifted around him like a plague, violet mist draping him and extending over Zapdos itself.

Gary flew ahead on Moltres, white eyes wide with alarm as he looked back at Ash. The two Pikachu squeaked in fear as the purple Ghost mist and the water each overtook them, and they held on with their little paws for dear life. Ash heaved in a breath to shout after Gary, but water filled his mouth and he choked. Zapdos squawked again, an irate, shrill screech, and the whirlpools slammed into it with merciless abandon.

The hyper-compressed blast of air that ran against the wind spurred Dragonair into action, and it wrapped around Lily and tackled her to the ground just in time to avoid an Air Cutter that sliced off a chunk of her ponytail and cut into the jagged shore like a landmine had gone off. Rolling with Dragonair, Lily grunted in pain from her many injuries, disoriented, but the sight of Aerodactyl circling after its lethal attempt sobered her quickly enough.

Tyranitar was charging toward her from the other side of the island near where Lance stood with Dragonite, its thick scales black with dark energy as it prepared to attack. Dragonite swooped its massive head around and caught Lily's eye, hollow and soulless much like Lance's.

"Crap," Lily breathed.

Three on one were deadly odds, and she was out of Pokémon save for Dragonair. Kingdra, and then Charizard... She blinked the tears away as she struggled to stand with Dragonair's help and began to retreat from the charging Tyranitar.

Impossible. That was what this situation was. An impossible quagmire, quicksand that sucked her under the more she struggled to stay alive against the odds. Dragonair could never take out Dragonite, Tyranitar, and Aerodactyl alone. Inconceivable, even to her sharp mind.

"*Do what you're best at,"* Gary's warning echoed in her head.

"Be smart," Lily said aloud, her amber eyes darting between a stampeding Tyranitar and Aerodactyl circling like a prehistoric buzzard over the prospect of carrion.

How to be smart with a small army of unstoppable Dragons salivating for her blood?

Tyranitar roared and unleashed its charged Dark Pulse in a fury. Dragonair's head fins glowed red and it fired a vermilion Dragon Rage that grew like a tidal wave and collided with the Dark Pulse in an angry maelstrom. Black soon overcame red and the darkness devoured Dragonair's attack, but it bought the serpentine Dragon enough time to spirit Lily to safety once again.

"If he didn't have an army..." Lily pondered as she watched Tyranitar stamp its feet angrily at the missed chance to crush her. "Tiny, no more attacking. Just keep me close to Tyranitar!"

Dragonair looked at her with a foreign glint in its eye, more animalistic than the quiet intelligence it usually showed her, and she laid her bloody, fingernail-torn hand on its neck.

"It's okay, don't be scared. I have an idea."

I hope.

Doing her best to tamp down the pain—she thought of warm snicker doodle cookies and cherry pie and homemade mashed potatoes, anything to take her subconscious to a place far from the pain—Lily looped her arm around Dragonair's neck and hooked her legs around its body at the heels, and she held on. The lithe Dragon took off in a slither, its tough scales protecting it from the rugged terrain, and it

showed little pushback from its injuries. Dragons were strong.

Tyranitar saw them running and gauged the distance. Lily immediately quailed.

"Closer, Tiny! We can't let it use Earthquake again!"

Dragonair obeyed, but it moved like water, ebbing and flowing, within reach and then out again, just far enough to make Earthquake unreliable and Hyper Beam unattractive. Tyranitar narrowed its demonic, yellow eyes at Lily, and she wondered if it understood what she was doing.

Reaching with her free hand, Lily shouted past the raw pain in her previously drowned throat. "Snap out of it, Tyranitar! You know me!"

Tyranitar was hearing none of it and lunged at Dragonair, its meaty claws glowing red with Dragon Claw. Dragonair spooked and slithered away just as Tyranitar slammed a claw into the ground and punched out a fresh crater five feet in diameter. Lily didn't want to think about what a crater that big would look like through Dragonair's middle.

Lance, drawn by the sound of her shouting, saw what she was doing and reached for Tyranitar. "Crush her!"

Behind him, Moltres burst out of a frozen whirlpool in a gust of fire, the heat of which was felt even down on the ground. Dragonite hissed and shielded Lance with its leathery wings as rain droplets, molten as the water burned, fell upon them. Lance redirected his focus to Lugia and shouted for it to go after the fleeing Articuno.

Aerodactyl squawked and began to power up another Hyper Beam in response to Lance's command, but Lily wasn't about to give up.

"Tyranitar!" she screamed at the green dinosaur and Dragonair looped around again in this deadly game of tag. "I know you can hear me in there! Ivy's counting on you, so let me help you!"

"*Tyranitar knows you. He'll fight with you because of that, Titan or no.*"

At the mention of Ivy, Tyranitar hesitated as it lifted its clubbed fists for another attack. Its pupils dilated behind reptilian, double eyelids, like it was trying to focus on a single point but having trouble.

"You know me!" she shouted again. "And I trust you like I trust Ivy!"

"*Think of him as a part of me with you on the ground out there.*"

In a stroke of madness, Lily let go of Dragonair and tumbled over the ground. Struggling against the pain and the monstrous fear inhabiting her bones, she looked up at Tyranitar lumbering toward her, maw hanging open and yellow eyes narrowed to slits. Tar-like smoke leaked from between its serrated teeth, each step louder than the last—*boom, boom, boom.* Lily bravely—stupidly—stood her ground and reached for the green dinosaur with both hands.

"Please," she rasped.

The air overhead began to pop as Aerodactyl's Hyper Beam gathered energy. It threw its head back to attack.

"I'm not just some Titan, I'm her friend," Lily pleaded with Tyranitar as it towered over her, ready to crush her with its bare hands.

Aerodactyl squawked and released the Hyper Beam, an angry bolt of raw, orange energy. Against her better judgment, Lily threw herself at Tyranitar and laid her bloody hands flat against its armored belly. Dragonair screamed somewhere behind her, and in a flash the Hyper Beam hit, blinding and cold.

The ground fell out from beneath Lily's feet and she fell. She didn't hear the scream she felt tearing at her windpipe, and she had no control over her battered body as it was thrust from left to right and finally fell upon something hard and sharp, further exacerbating her broken ribs. Every breath was like drinking acid. But the dead don't feel pain.

Still alive...

The dust settled and the haze of adrenaline and agony cleared enough for Lily to look around. She was pinned to the ground, the sharp rocks digging into her back and in between her shoulder blades. Around her, the Hyper Beam had done its work obliterating the coast for about ten feet in every direction. The rocks were blown to smithereens, washed out and warped as though they'd been heated to extremes and then doused in ice. And somehow, she was still alive.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she looked up, unable to speak, at the pair of yellow eyes looking down on her. Tyranitar's breath was hot and reeked of meat and something damp and cold that had never seen the light of day. But it wasn't trying to kill her as it studied her face.

"Ty...Tyrani...tar..."

Something got its attention, and it lifted up off of Lily. Immediately, she looked around and saw the utter devastation Aerodactyl's Hyper Beam had wrought on the environment. Save for the spot where Tyranitar had hunched over her. Protected her.

It worked!

Tyranitar turned and lifted its square head skyward, and Lily stifled a gasp of horror at the blackened, smoking crags that ran down its back and leaked thick, goopy blood. Tyranitar hardly noticed.

Aerodactyl swooped down low, intending to level off Tyranitar with a physical attack this time, but Lily was not about to let it happen.

"Dragon Tail!" she bit out.

Aerodactyl reached out with its talons, looking to wrench Tyranitar off the ground and tear it asunder. But the green dinosaur fell to the ground, balanced on its front claws, and swung around hard. The sickening crack of Tyranitar's armored tail connecting with Aerodactyl's head was so close to home that for a split second Lily was sure it had been her own head to snap like that. Aerodactyl grunted and went down hard, skidding over rock and gravel and nearly barreling into Dragonair, who'd made its way back to Lily.

Lily stared, wide-eyed and breathing shallowly, at what Tyranitar had accomplished with a single blow. As though sensing its audience, Tyranitar threw back its head and roared. This monster, it was just as insolent and proud as its trainer, injuries be damned. Ivy had trained it well.

Lily rushed to Aerodactyl's side where it had skidded to a stop some yards away. "Rocky!"

The rains were interminable, and they seemed to get stronger with every passing minute. Lily was soaked to the bone so thoroughly that she was sure she was absorbing the water and she would never, ever be dry again. Every ragged breath drew in water and lancing pain in her ribs, but she made it to Aerodactyl's side.

It was breathing and convulsing from the shock of the blow to its head. One of its horns had chipped clean off, and the side of its face was cracked and bleeding. But the damned thing was made of stone and had held together enough to keep its skull from being crushed to

a pulp. Lily sniffled and wiped rainwater from her mouth and nose as she reached out a hand gingerly to touch Aerodactyl's eye. It was fast swelling shut and leaked blood. Some teeth had fallen out and were scattered among the rocks.

Lily's vision blurred from the tears and the incessant rain. "Rocky," she called to the Pokémon. "I'm sorry, but I promised Gary I'd look after you. Even from yourself."

Aerodactyl groaned and its tongue lolled lazily in its mouth. The rain washed away its blood and the grime, casting it in a silken glow. The odd reptile had always had a fondness for water.

Tyranitar and Dragonair came up behind Lily and peered down at them. Noticing its fellow Dragons, Aerodactyl shifted its weight and attempted to get up. Alarmed, Lily touched its neck with her hand, and Aerodactyl angled its head around to see her out of its good eye.

"Rocky," she said, wiping tears and rain from her eyes. "You're really something!"

Aerodactyl and Tyranitar exchanged a heavy look, but neither lashed out at the other.

"But Lance's army... He's supposed to have absolute control. So why...?"

Lance was busy directing Lugia, and the bird summoned enough power to raise a hundred whirlpools off the sea's surface all at once. He was so caught up that he didn't notice the defectors right under his nose.

"That's it!" Lily started to stand, and Dragonair snaked around her to help take the pressure off. "He can't control Lugia and all of you guys at once! It's too much even for him. Which means..."

Dragonite, however, had been keeping an eye on things and now became suspicious when Aerodactyl fell from the sky. It bared its huge teeth and faced Lily's group now, wings folded behind its back and tail curled around its legs. Lance noticed Dragonite's change of focus and laid eyes on Lily. She couldn't see him well from this far away, but the silence that ensued as he just stared in her direction for a few seconds was telling.

Lily put a hand each on Tyranitar and Aerodactyl, who was beginning to regain its full senses after the blow to its hard head. "This is it,

guys. Remember, we're here to help Ivy and Gary."

An image of Charizard just before Dragonite had bitten into it and ripped it in half sent a tremor through Lily's shaking frame.

"And we're gonna get that Dragonite back for what it did to Charizard." Her voice shook, but the Pokémon beside her seemed to understand her meaning well enough as they bared their teeth at the colossal Dragon in the distance.

"*Be smart."*

"Let's go, spread out," Lily commanded.

Tyranitar and Aerodactyl began to separate, giving Dragonite a wide berth, while Dragonair hung back with Lily.

Lance didn't even say anything, and Lily found herself wishing he would. Scream, get mad, even put her down. But there was only the rain and those dark eyes that lingered on her, too calm and too eerie. Disappointed, and perhaps nearing the end of his patience.

He signaled to Dragonite with a wave of his hand, and the orange beast launched into the air with Lily in its cross hairs. Aerodactyl squawked and dug its wing claws into the ground, but Lily waved it off.

"Steady, Rocky!"

Dragonite looked between the two pseudo-Dragons and began to generate a red, glowing Outrage, perhaps to take them both out with one, singular effort.

Lily waited as Dragonite built up its reserves, then latched onto Dragonair again and took off. "Dark Pulse!"

Curling darkness emanated from Tyranitar, picking up speed and scope as the cloud of rot swirled toward Dragonite. Dragonite was unperturbed and set its sights on Tyranitar as its first target, angling down and preparing to charge.

"Rocky, use Ancient Power!"

Aerodactyl writhed as yellow energy sloughed from its scales and summoned a whirlwind of rocks and debris that hurtled straight for Dragonite. The orange beast, caught in between two attacks, did

exactly what Lily predicted it would laden with all that pent up power, rage building—it dropped to the ground.

And right into Dragonair's sights.

Lily let go of Dragonair and fell into a pained crouch.

"Dragon Pulse!" she shouted.

Dragonair opened its mouth and the precious pearls at its throat and tail glowed scarlet. Dragonite punched at its smaller, inferior relative, but Dragonair slithered in between its sausage fists and fired the Dragon Pulse at point-blank range.

"Yes!" Lily said, immediately regretting the burst of excitement when her ribs screamed in pain.

Dragonite howled and fell back, lost control of its Outrage, and its tail smashed the ground on its way down. Aerodactyl had injured Dragonite's belly earlier, and with Dragonair's efforts, perhaps Lance's Dragon army would have been reduced from three to zero.

No such luck, of course. Dragonite wobbled on its legs and used its tail to help balance. A pit-like gash bled on its chest where Dragonair's attack had smashed through the tough scales and ripped into the sinewy muscle beneath. Blue blood ran like rivers down Dragonite's belly, but the wound was shallow. It had taken everything Dragonair had just to rip through the scales.

"Tiny!"

Dragonair slithered toward Lily, having suffered blowback from its own attack. Its pale underbelly was bruised and bleeding, the blood pooling between its scales as it moved. But it was okay, still holding on. Though for much longer, Lily wasn't willing to bet it.

"Now! Blast it!" Lily ordered.

Aerodactyl and Tyranitar sank their claws into the ground and let Dragonite have it. The stunned king Dragon, still reeling from its abruptly snuffed Outrage and the sneak attack, was too slow to avoid the double Hyper Beam that close in from both sides. It fell forward and swung its tail around, taking Aerodactyl's attack in the tail and protecting its now vulnerable belly. Tyranitar's Hyper Beam connected with Dragonite's shoulder, missing its wing by inches, and knocked it off balance again.

Dragonair shot forward ready to Dragon Tail its older evolutionary form into next Tuesday, but Lance finally intervened.

"Fall forward!" he yelled up at Dragonite.

Dragonite reached with its claws and this time managed to grab ahold of Dragonair, derailing its Dragon Tail at the last second. The two of them crashed to the ground, and Dragonair screamed.

"Tiny!" Lily dashed toward the fallen Dragons, her heart wrenching behind her broken ribs as she imagined the worst.

Tyranitar rammed Dragonite from the left in a mean Skull Bash with enough momentum and raw fury to knock the huge Dragon on its side. A flash of blue caught Lily's eyes through the rain, and she ran toward it.

"Tiny! Oh god, Tiny, please," she said as she neared the two Dragons.

Dragonair lifted its head, and she could see the pain in its eyes. Dragonite had released it when Tyranitar rammed it, but Dragonair was bruised under its scales and breathing strangely. She suspected broken bones, maybe even internal bleeding. But Dragonair was alive and met her halfway out of the wreckage.

"Oh my god." Lily threw her arms around Dragonair, counting this as pure luck born of her lack of foresight. If it hadn't been for Tyranitar's interference...

"Enough!" Lance bellowed.

He had completely disregarded Lugia's battle with the birds as he advanced on Lily.

"How many times do I have to say it?" He shot out a hand toward Lily. "Stop resisting me!"

Against her better judgment, Lily felt the pull of him again, the way every cell in her body seemed to reach back for him even as her mind screamed to retreat, to put as much distance between him and her as possible. But she couldn't move. Frozen in place, she watched with wide, terrified eyes as Lance the Dragon Master glared at her.

"I won't stop!" she shouted back at him. "I won't stop, and neither will they!"

Lance remembered the battle happening overhead and squinted through the rain. His breathing was coming in ragged spurts now, misting in the chill, and this close, she discerned the tremble in his reaching hand.

"Then I'll make you stop," he said, tired, as if he regretted the words. *You made me do this! It's* your *fault, not mine!*

"Lance..." She trailed off, at a loss for words for him when he'd done plenty to merit the worst ones she could imagine.

He looked at her again, gaze far away, someplace where she could not follow, dared not go, but he was taking her anyway. The moment when life flashes before your eyes? It was a lie. There was only him, and her, and the rain that washed their precious blood down the drain.

"Dragonite," he said in a voice that wasn't his, whispered from the pit he'd fallen into.

Dragonite stretched its wings and dripped blue rain as it climbed high into the air. Lightning flashed and thunder followed, the legendary battle raged on over the bay, and Dragonite spread its wings, unafraid. Silhouetted against the black storm clouds, it looked down on Lily and her team like a grim reaper come to collect what it was due.

"Draco Meteor!" Lance commanded over the roar of the storm.

Dragonite opened its mouth, awash with bright, yellow light that swirled and condensed. Dragonair shook with fright as it sensed the astronomical power above.

"No, Lance stop!" Lily said, unsure what was coming but sure enough that it would be the end.

She had his full attention now, the fight above far away.

"I won't stop," he echoed her defiance. "And neither will he."

Dragonite released its attack, a burst of hyper-concentrated yellow energy that split and spread and grew as it fell back to earth, a hundred meteors that would crash into the island, leaving no place untouched. Dragonair wrapped around Lily again and yanked her back, forcing her to move. She hit her head against its side in the whiplash, dazed, the feeling suddenly flooding back and Lance's odd pull nothing but a memory.

The first meteors hit the ground and exploded on contact, devastating a ten-foot radius and reducing it to molten, broken ruin. Lily screamed when one hit the ground just behind Dragonair as it rushed with her. But wherever the sleek Dragon ran, the meteors followed. There was no safety.

She looked left and a meteor smashed to the ground. She looked right and yellow light flashed and super-heated air popped as another hurtled close. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. She looked up and saw one falling straight for her, a falling sun that blinded and burned. Lily ducked her head and held onto Dragonair, wishing it was smaller so she could shield it with her body and keep it safe, like she couldn't keep Kingdra safe. Like she'd failed Charizard.

A shadow fell over her and the meteor exploded, ringing in her ears and making her see stars. Dragonair writhed in her grip, but she barely felt it as time slowed down and the earth fell apart underfoot. Darkness, stifling heat, her exposed fingernail beds filled with congealed blood and salt and dirt. She couldn't say how long it went on, this hellish nightmare just waiting for death, a different kind of drowning. Maybe worse.

Light crept through the darkness, yellow and shimmering, and it lifted the shadowed veil from Lily's eyes. Dragonair was curled up around her, protecting her neck and head. Beyond it, something huge and heavy slowly came to life over her head. She smelled blood and something wet and dank, like a drain, rainwater soaking flesh. And the shadow above her rumbled like thunder.

"Rocky?"

Lily gaped as Aerodactyl slowly lifted off the ground on shaky legs, wings spread and glowing with the last vestiges of an Ancient Power attack. Slabs of rock and debris sloughed off its broad wings as it righted itself.

Movement to her left revealed Tyranitar also lumbering to its feet, growling when its tall, spiked head bumped Aerodactyl's wing sheltering it.

"Oh my god." Lily looked around as Aerodactyl retracted its wings and huddled on the ground—what was left of it. Draco Meteor had died down.

The entire coast was gone.

Craters filled more craters, and water filled those. Seawater rushed to fill the smoking holes and crept up to Lily's thighs. Patches of yellow energy petered out like campfires under the rain as the flood spread and the ocean reclaimed half of Shamouti Island.

Aerodactyl was breathing heavily, its good eye drooping and its wings almost fully submerged in the shallows.

"You saved us," Lily said as Dragonair uncurled from around her. "Rocky, you saved us all."

The only strip of island that remained was the patch Aerodactyl's spread wings had shielded from the attack. Armored with earth and rock courtesy of its Ancient Power technique, the extinct reptile had saved Lily and the other Pokémon from otherwise certain death.

Aerodactyl lost its footing and splashed in the water.

"Rocky!"

Lily waded to the beast as quickly as she could and reached for its battered head. A lone, black eye had trouble focusing on her, and she ran her shaking, broken hands over Aerodactyl's snout, the rim of its good eye, the jagged stump of its missing horn. Tyranitar growled nearby, also slumped and breathing heavily. This was it, as much as they could give and more.

Lily sniffled. "Thank you," she whispered. She'd never meant it more in all her life.

"That Aerodactyl," Lance said from several yards away, unscathed in rushing water up to his knees. "I've never seen a Pokémon survive Draco Meteor before."

Lance's voice dispelled any shred of relief Lily had been feeling, and she walked around Aerodactyl to face him.

The sounds of battle raged on overhead, drawing Lance's attention. Lily's heartbeat thundered against her cracked ribs.

Keep him focused!

"I revived Rocky from fossilized DNA. He's been with me and my friends his whole life. You won't control him or Tyranitar anymore!"

Lance fixed her with a hollow stare. Where had all the rancor gone?

The passion for his cause, the presence? He looked like he hadn't eaten or slept in days, drained to the bone.

"What a pointless thing to say," he said. "I have no need to control any of you anymore."

Dragonite hovered far above, and he raised his hand.

"Goodbye, Lily."

Dragonite roared and plummeted to the earth. Lily gasped and backed up against Aerodactyl. There was no way either it or Tyranitar could stop that monster now, and Lance knew it. It was just the two of them now, alone together. No one to pull her from the tidal abyss.

Except Dragonair.

"Tiny! Dragon Rush!" Lily shouted. "Same as last time!"

Dragonair slithered through the shallows and launched into the air. Sapphire light bloomed from the pearl at its throat and enveloped it in a shimmering veil as it gained altitude and speed. Dragonite descended on a crimson tide, its Dragon Rage building as it fell upon its lesser form, inferior in every way but still charging, fearless and trusting Lily's judgment.

Lance followed them with his eyes, and Lily watched with equal attention. Dragonite roared and prepared to rip Dragonair out of the air with its bare hands. It spread its arms, aflame with Dragon Rage's cloak, and reached. Dragonair slithered ever faster, its head lowered to bare its sharp horn. Dragon Rush propelled it forward, a final burst of speed and momentum, just as Dragonite smashed its big paws together and barely grazed Dragonair's slippery tail.

But the blue serpent kept going until its horn pierced the tenderized flesh exposed between Dragonite's smashed chest plate scales, the same spot Dragonair had blasted before. It kept going until the Dragon Rush chewed a hole through Dragonite's exposed flesh and expanded inward. It kept going, head then body and finally the pearl-adorned tail, until it burst out the other side between Dragonite's shoulder blades and through a leathery wing with an explosive pop.

Lance stared, mouth agape and catching rain, unable to summon the will even to scream in protest.

Blue blood spurted from Dragonite's back and its pierced left wing

caved. The Dragon roared in pain and shock as the aftereffects of the Dragon Rush energy continued to tear it apart from the inside. Unable to fly, Dragonite plummeted to the ground head first.

Lance and Lily scrambled to get out of the way, but the winds knocked Dragonite's corpse off-course and it landed with a smack and a splash on the flooded coast. The shock of impact rocked the island and kicked up waves enough to knock both Lily and Lance over, and he tumbled a fair distance west toward the deeper waters.

Lily coughed up seawater as she lost her footing and got swept away from Aerodactyl, but Tyranitar bumped her and stopped her from drifting away too far. She sputtered and wiped the seawater from her bloodshot eyes, blearily looking around.

"Tiny," she rasped. "Tiny, where are you?"

She hadn't seen Dragonair's fall, too busy looking out for Dragonite to avoid getting flattened. Now, there was no sign of the blue Dragon, and she began to panic.

"Tiny!" she said more forcefully. "Where are you? Tiny!"

Oh please, oh god please...

She saw Kingdra blasting Gyarados with a final attack just before the huge water Dragon gobbled it up in one bite and doomed them both to Davy Jones's Locker. Lily lost her balance and slipped again despite Tyranitar's hold on her.

"Tiny," she sobbed. "Tiny, where... Where are you?"

She waded on her hands and knees, struggled to stay above the surface, when her hand inadvertently closed around something small and round, too perfect to be a rock. Using Tyranitar's thigh for leverage, she hauled herself up and brought the object to her face.

It was a Pokéball, but not one she recognized. A small, silver star was etched into the lid. Splashing drew Lily's attention, and a familiar face popped up from the shallows.

"Tiny!"

She threw her arms around Dragonair, choking on her tears and laughter and the seawater, and she plunged them both back into the water.

"Oh my god," she sobbed through her giggles. "Oh my god."

Dragonair did little to support her, its eyes glassy and clouded with pain and exhaustion. But it was alive, it was here, it had come back.

"Tiny," she said again, not quite believing it.

Dragonite's carcass lay unmoving in the distance, its blood casting a dark, slow shadow in the water like spreading poison. Lance was jogging through the water to get to it, his cape long abandoned, and it sounded like he was shouting something. Lily couldn't make out the words, but they were directed at the fallen Dragonite.

"Lance," she said, a ripple of sadness passing through her despite all that had happened. Sadness for what, she couldn't say. For him, how they had arrived here, what they had lost, what they still had to lose even now. It was an emptiness that gnawed at the pit of her stomach when she looked at him, breathed in the silence between them, hovering around Dragonite's corpse.

His Dragonite...

He was out of Pokémon, out of options. This was her chance to corner him directly. Lily got up and looked around at her Pokémon. This was a journey she would have to make alone. They had given her all they could. The unfamiliar Pokéball was heavy in her hand, but there was no time to worry about it now, so she clipped it to her belt and began trudging through the sunken coastline as quickly as her injuries and the current would allow.

"Lance!" she called to him.

He was near Dragonite, but he stopped when he heard her call out to him. Stopped and stared, like he'd forgotten she was there at all. Dark eyes wide, lost even. That ripple of sadness she'd felt earlier crashed into her like a tidal wave now, and she covered her mouth with her hands.

He didn't move, but her legs began to carry her closer, compelled by some unseen force. This had to stop. She had to stop it.

An inhuman screech pierced the air all of a sudden, and Lily's vision seared with blinding light as the battle overhead reached an abrupt and brutal climax. Shielding her eyes, she tried to see what was happening, and Lance looked, too. But when the afterglow dissipated, Lily's legs began to move of their own accord again—toward Lance.

"Lance!" she screamed, reaching out a hand.

He looked from the sky to her through the pouring rain, but he didn't move, didn't try to escape the inescapable. He simply reached out a hand to her, as he had before, offering, though she was too far away to reach him.

The sky fell in a rush of rain and gravity and swallowed him whole.

Ash choked on seawater and doubled over heaving. Gengar and Mismagius's furious whispers in his head magnified as they pulled on him, tethered him to the spot, but the whirlpools slapped him around left and right and up and down, breaking on his back and drowning him in midair.

The Ghosts filled his head where the rushing waters couldn't reach, and it became too much to bear. He dug his fingers into Zapdos's static feathers, the rubber lining in his armor barely enough to keep him from suffering acute electric burns, and screamed through the water filling his mouth.

A burst of white light blinded Ash, and shadows quickly filled the space in its wake. Thunderbolts, hundreds in all direction, gutted the enchanted whirlpools like butchers' knives in the bellies of squirming pigs, writhing to get away but too heavy and clumsy. They squealed as the violet lightning pierced them and ran down their trunks—ten, then thirty, then sixty, until the lightning infected the entire army with its enervating venom.

Ash sucked in a ragged breath and Zapdos broke free of the clawing whirlpools and caught up to its brethren above.

"What the hell did you do!" Ivy shouted from above.

"He combined the Ghosts' Aura with Zapdos's lightning!" Gary said, his pale eyes following the chaotic destruction over the seascape. "And it actually worked!"

Lugia roared and pulled away from the dying whirlpools, its Psychic influence thwarted by the ingenious combination of Ghost and Electric attacks delivered on a scope only a natural disaster like Zapdos could ever accomplish. But the King of the Nine Oceans was not deterred, and under Lance's silent guidance, it redoubled its efforts on eliminating each of its rival birds one at a time—starting with Ash and Zapdos.

"I think I just pissed it off more!" Ash said as he ducked down just behind the two Pikachu and urged Zapdos to speed up.

Lugia's wings began to glow blue, and its eerie, pale eyes smoked with light. Gary and Moltres veered a hard right toward Ash and Zapdos.

"Ash, look out!" he shouted.

But Lugia fired a powerful Psybeam after the Thunder Bird that followed Zapdos like a homing missile. The Ghosts cloaked it entirely in their violet miasma, but the shift in the air and the Psychic energy hurtling toward them spooked them, and they screamed in Ash's head loud enough to make his vision double.

"Blizzard!"

Out of nowhere, the sleek Articuno—the fastest of the three legendary birds—whizzed past Gary and Moltres and delivered a devastating cold snap with a frigid flap of its wings. The rain turned to sleet and snow, narrowed to sharp icicles, and Zapdos screeched as it caught the first hail of icy terror. Ash grabbed Pika and ChuChu in a frantic attempt to protect them from the severe and sudden drop in temperature to nearly sixty below. The Psybeam hit Zapdos in the thigh, a glancing blow that could have been much worse had the drop in temperature and air pressure not cut off its ascent. The Blizzard swept in like vengeful mist, swift and omnipresent, and it stopped Lugia dead in its tracks.

Unfortunately, it stopped Zapdos, too.

"Oh, sh-shit!" Ash chattered as the breath he sucked in felt like it had frozen his lungs solid.

A bright flash was Ash's only warning when a wall of fire crashed into Zapdos. Immediately, the cold snap dissipated and Ash could breathe again, the fire warming his frozen armor but not burning it.

"Why am I always saving your ass!" Gary shouted.

Ash looked up and spotted Gary and Alakazam riding Moltres, the fire enveloping Zapdos coming from a steady stream of the stuff where Moltres soared just above them. The Blizzard attack blasted Lugia back, but the beast's Psychic powers spared it the worst of the attack. It had created a cocoon of telekinetic energy around itself to insulate from the cold, and Articuno could not keep up the power forever. With a final burst of energy, Articuno veered under Zapdos to circle

around. Zapdos squawked angrily at its brethren, but Articuno didn't so much as spare the Thunder Bird a glance. Lugia was now on its own, recovering from the super Ice attack, and Ash had an idea.

"We gotta get that thing now while it's dazed!" Ash shouted.

And I got a bad feeling it's gonna be me in there.

"Wait, Ash, we need a plan!" Gary protested.

"Here's a plan: save my ass when it gets rough! You're good at that!"

Zapdos took off toward Lugia, and Ash ignored the Ghosts' protests in his head. They had a narrow window here.

"Ash!"

Gary's voice was lost to the wind and rain, and Zapdos swooped back around toward Lugia.

"Okay guys," Ash said to his Ghosts. "We're goin' in hot! Clear the way!"

If Zapdos felt the Ghosts' fear, it didn't show it as it raced toward Lugia. Ash could only trust the legendary bird, hoping this newest crazy idea wouldn't be his last. Lugia caught sight of them and spread its wings in a show of intimidation, which worked on Ash, at least, and he almost lost his grip and fell off Zapdos right there. But the Thunder Bird was fearless and let out a battle cry, talons outstretched. The knife-like talons, cloaked in Ghostly Aura, pierced through Lugia's Psychic Barrier and sank into its rubbery belly beneath to the ankle.

Lugia roared in pain, and Ash got an eyeful of the terrible creature. It was twice Zapdos's size, and its aura was pure white, like Gary's, but blinding. One look, and it silenced the Ghosts squabbling in Ash's head. But the moment didn't last. Lugia threw its head back, and white-hot light gathered in its mouth. The Ghosts shrieked, unable to dispel this new power, and Ash nearly pissed himself as he understood what was about to happen.

"Zapdos!"

The Thunder Bird began to spark, but Pika and ChuChu squealed in fear and burrowed their faces among its static feathers. The spectral Aura surged as though with a life of its own, expanding in all directions, but Lugia was faster. A monstrous beam of white light hit

Zapdos in the underbelly and ripped its talons free. Ash screamed, and the Aeroblast attack bit through Gengar and Mismagius's veil to hurtle Zapdos down to the sea. Chunks of Lugia's flesh and silvery feathers fell with it.

Zapdos tumbled over itself as it fell toward the frothing waters below, the rain weighing it down even more as gravity raced it to the bottom. The violet cloak that draped Ash and Zapdos receded back into Ash, the Ghosts' protection rendered null.

"Ash, you goddamned prima donna," Ivy grumbled to herself. "Articuno, let's get in there!"

Articuno remained silent, unlike its brethren, and cut through wind and rain toward Lugia, death on dark wings. The bird listened to Ivy's commands, but it moved of its own accord in tandem with Zapdos and Moltres, as though invisible strings connected them and kept them close. There was no telling how far it would go under her command, but so far so good.

Moltres soared to the left in a beeline toward Ash, and Ivy watched as Gary tapped into the power of Miracle Eye to channel a bright, blue wave of Confusion that caught the plummeting Thunder Bird and its passengers before they could hit the water. Moltres's piercing cry drew Lugia's attention, and Ivy saw her opening.

"Now! Ice Beam!"

Articuno swooped in close and the rain froze around it. Ivy shielded her face to avoid getting cut and ducked down with Wigglytuff just as Articuno opened its hooked beak and fired off a blue ice bolt at Lugia. But the sea monster, perhaps attracted by the sudden outpouring of Psychic energy from Gary, took off after Moltres. Articuno was in the full throes of its attack when Ivy noticed Lugia's abrupt change of focus.

"Gary!" she screamed.

All of a sudden, the sky brightened behind Ivy and Wigglytuff shrieked. A Dragonite had just unleashed a burst of yellow light that split into a hundred or more falling projectiles, and they ricocheted off each other as they hurtled for Shamouti Island's coast.

Where Lily was fighting alongside Tyranitar and her other Pokémon.

In the course of about four seconds, Shamouti's entire coastline was decimated, Articuno's Ice Beam missed Lugia completely as it changed trajectory chasing Moltres, and Gary put everything he and Alakazam had into keeping Zapdos airborne. The Thunder Bird managed to right itself with Confusion's aid and regained flight, and not a moment too soon—Ivy's warning to Gary shocked him out of his concentration and he yelled at Moltres to get the hell out of there.

Lugia flew after Moltres, its wounds somehow negligible, and generated a Psychic attack that could have swallowed a small village The air rippled as it succumbed to the invisible energy. The falling rain warped and disintegrated to mist. Even the ocean below stilled to allow the treacherous energy to pass unhindered, and it was headed straight for Moltres. The air became thick and heavy, musky, and Articuno shied away from the cloud of telekinetic energy.

That thing's all over the place!

Lugia had completely forgotten about Zapdos and the earlier confrontation, now fixated singularly on Moltres and the rival Psychic it carried. Like a wild animal, no sense of planning or strategy. Not like before. Ivy looked down at Shamouti, but the entire coast had been obliterated by Dragonite's freak attack moments ago. There was no sign of Lily or Lance or anyone.

Ivy's hands shook, but not from the cold Articuno naturally emanated. Fear for her friend shook her to the core, and Wigglytuff tugged on her hair, perhaps sensing her volatile emotions. Lily had to hang on by herself a little longer. Right now, Gary and Ash needed her here. And fast, judging from the way that Psychic attack was all but eating the air and rain and seawater in its path as it hunted Moltres with a mind of its own. Moltres was losing ground to it, and soon there would be no Moltres left.

"Let's go!" Ivy pushed on Articuno's frozen mane to reinforce the message, and the Ice Bird dipped in a wicked swoop after Lugia. "Okay Wigglytuff! Blast that son of a bitch!"

Articuno swooped in behind Lugia, and Wigglytuff hopped up on Ivy's head, took a deep breath that inflated it to nearly twice its size, and fired a Hyper Beam that singed Ivy's bangs. The orange beam screamed in her ears and Ivy dug her fingers deeper among Articuno's feathers. The orange beam zigzagged toward Lugia and hit it at the base of its whip-like tail, exploding on impact. Lugia roared and twitched from the shock of pain, and it veered right.

Articuno saw the opening and dived without prompting, taking off like a black bullet past the flailing Lugia. The Psychic attack stampeded along ahead, just feet from Moltres's flaming tail feathers now, and Gary looked back, eyes wide with fear when he saw Ivy and Articuno closing in.

"Stop that attack, Articuno!"

Articuno reared back and let out a death rattle, breaking its battle silence for the first time, that seemed to scare even the rain as it slowed its falling. A rush of frigid air expanded from its open beak and attacked the very air. Frost crystals bloomed out of nowhere, freezing the falling rain then smashing it to diamond dust, too cold to sustain solid form. The ghastly touch reached for the aberrant Psychic attack just as it rolled into Moltres's tail feathers and ripped them apart.

A misty cloud came to life as Articuno's Sheer Cold infected the Psychic attack and froze the light waves it bent as it moved, quickly freezing them in place and giving shape and form to the invisible attack.

It was massive.

A stretch of roiling fog that extended a hundred feet in every direction, it groaned as the cold overtook it and Moltres, swallowing them both whole. The last Ivy saw of Gary, he was engulfed in flames and the Psychic attack swept over him, mid-freeze.

"Gary!" Ivy screamed.

Articuno pulled up and flew just above the stretch of space Sheer Cold had annihilated, and Wigglytuff shivered as it looked over the results.

"Holy crap."

Moltres, reduced to boiling flames, burst through the frozen Psychic energy with a vengeance. Articuno ducked out of the way to avoid the conflagration as best it could, hissing when it was splashed by a few errant chunks of burning slush. Moltres squawked angrily at having been frozen a second time, but it was still in one piece, and so were Gary and Alakazam.

"A little warning next time!" he shouted up at her.

"Gee, you're *welcome*! Did you even see the *size* of that thing coming after you?"

"Guys!" Ash and a recovered Zapdos pulled into line with them. "I got an idea!"

"Your last idea nearly got you and Zapdos sunk to the bottom of the sea!" Gary said.

The two Pikachu chittered angrily at Gary on Ash's behalf.

"Just hear me out!" Ash tried again.

Lugia, having recovered from Wigglytuff's sucker punch attack before, hovered ahead over the churning waters, gathering energy.

"Make it quick!" Gary said.

"I think we gotta pummel that thing all at the same time! It keeps comin' after one of us, and look where that's gotten us!"

"If we attack at the same time, we could destroy each other! It's too risky!"

Ivy stole a glance at the decimated island below. The coast was flooded now, and it was hard to make out what was going on from so high up, but the Dragonite was powering up another attack, glowing red, and got ready to dive. Something was happening down there.

"I think Ash is right!" Ivy shouted at them over the roaring rain. "Whatever strategy Lugia had before is totally gone now! I think this is our chance to hit it while it's just reacting to us!"

"You're both gonna get me killed one of these days!" Gary waved to them to split up, finally relenting.

"Not today!" Ash said with a grin.

"Not today," Ivy whispered to herself.

Articuno's bloody eye swiveled to see her over its shoulder, and she wondered if it understood.

"Let's finish this, Articuno."

Articuno remained silent, but it took off toward the west while Ash and Zapdos veered east. Moltres squawked in anger again as it made a beeline straight for Lugia. The sea beast noticed what they were doing and spread its wings, intending to turn the wrath of the sea upon them.

"Ivy!" Gary shouted.

Ivy ducked down, and the beginnings of a dozen whirlpools rose off the water's surface to surround Lugia. "Blizzard!"

Articuno pulled up nearly vertical and sent a gust of frozen rain and sleet at Lugia. The cold spread, freezing rain drops in its path and churning them to snow and frost. The mighty gale overtook Lugia's whirlpools, freezing them on contact before they could surround Lugia. The cold froze Lugia's feathers, coating it in a thin layer of frost that only ticked it off more. Its pale eyes began to glow, and the beginnings of another monstrous Psychic attack rippled at its edges.

"Fire Blast!" Gary shouted.

Moltres was all too happy to oblige, and it unleashed the most disgustingly huge stream of fire Ivy had ever seen. Blue and sticky, the Fire Blast was more like a steady eruption of lava than pure fire, and it tore through the Blizzard barrier without a thought.

Lugia redoubled its efforts and directed its Psychic energy to manipulate the liquid fire, bending it at the last moment and creating a shell around itself where the blue fire and frigid Blizzard snow wrapped around it. Finally, Ash and Zapdos swooped in close.

"Hit it with everything you got!"

Pika and ChuChu raised their little tails and caught a thick lighting bolt from a thundercloud overhead that exploded when it hit Zapdos, and the Thunder Bird screeched, revitalized. Concentrating the static force into a single, pressurized mass at its center, Zapdos flapped its spiky wings and launched the ball projectile at Lugia. The Zap Cannon hit hard and true and dissolved into a million lightning bolts that wrapped around the Psychic barrier Lugia had thrown up around itself like chains, melting into the fire and ice slowly eating away at the shield.

"Keep it up!" Ash said.

The birds circled Lugia, pummeling it with Ice Beams and Fire Blasts and Thunderbolts to sustain the damage. Lugia had no time to breathe, no way to escape, and soon the frozen whirlpools beneath it disintegrated and collapsed back into the sea.

"There! A little more!" Gary shouted.

With a last burst of effort, the shield around Lugia exploded, and Ivy grabbed Wigglytuff to her chest in a last ditch effort to protect them both. Articuno reared, buffeted by the blast, but as soon as it had come, the blast withdrew and imploded on itself with a blood-curdling screech, directing everything at the center of mass. The scintillating display was as dazzling as the sun itself and lit up sea and sky for as far as the eye could see. Articuno struggled to remain airborne, its belly smoking from the rebuff, but it stubbornly held on and Ivy watched, mesmerized, as the light began to fade and all that was left was Lugia in the center of it all, blackened and bleeding and miraculously still in one piece.

Its white eyes, half-lidded, seemed to see through Ivy and draw her in, raw instinct and a will to survive, even beaten. Somewhere beyond the cold numbing her skin and the darkness she'd carried with her all these years and learned to love, she recognized that pitiful look.

You're not the real monster.

Lugia's head lolled, its wings drooped, and it fell.

Lily watched in horror as Lugia fell from the sky, rendered unconscious from its battle with the birds, and landed at the edge of the sunken shoreline right where Lance had been standing. One minute he was there, and the next he was just gone.

A deluge erupted on impact and submerged Dragonite's carcass, spiriting it away to the depth in a single gulp. The sea churned with the makings of a giant whirlpool, sucking Lugia and everything around it into its cradling eye. Lily ran as fast as she could through the current, but Lugia was so far away. There was no sign of Lance.

The waters rose with a mind of their own and carried Lugia back to sea, back to eternal slumber, back to the darkness from which Lance had pulled it using the pinnacle of Lily's scientific acumen and ingenuity. The dark ocean reclaimed them all, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

As suddenly as it had come, the whirlpool slowed and descended into the world below. Lily and Dragonair splashed among the thigh-high waters over what once had been the Shamouti coastline, searching and calling out. But there was nothing left. There was no sign of Lance.

The rains let up, the thunderstorm began to abate. The sea's ire

calmed, and the waning sunlight peeked through the slowly dispersing clouds. A strong wind whipped up the shallows, and Lily and Dragonair ducked against it. A rush of cold air nearly sent her falling over, but it passed quickly.

"Lily!"

Ivy's voice awakened something within Lily that she'd been holding onto, and she let it take over now. Weak-kneed and finally feeling the effects of her compounded injuries, the physical and mental exhaustion of the day and all that had transpired, Lily fell into Ivy's arms and let the taller girl bear most of her weight.

"Oh my god, you're okay," Ivy said, the relief in her voice a cool breath of air on Lily's clammy cheek.

"I'm alive," Lily managed with a weak smile.

She noticed the warped armor at Ivy's shoulder and how her left arm didn't move.

"You're hurt," Lily said, alarmed.

"Long story."

"Lily." Gary trudged toward them through the water and reached out a hand to help her stand. "I'm glad to see you're okay, and Rocky too."

Lily let the two of them support her, happy for the help with her sore, burned legs. "Yeah, Rocky's okay. He saved my life. All of us. Tyranitar, too."

Aerodactyl and Tyranitar had tried to make their way to the group, but the going was slow. Ivy waved to her oldest Pokémon, smiling.

"I told you they'd have your back," she said.

"Lily!"

Ash came running through the water behind her, and Gary helped her turn to meet him. Before she could get a word in edgewise, Ash threw his arms around her and scooped her up. Lily cried out in pain, her ribs having taken too much abuse today, and he set her down. But she managed a brave smile for him regardless.

"Oh my god, you're hurt." He took in her abused face, the way she slumped, knock-kneed, and immediately supported her with his own

weight.

"I'm okay," she said. "Took you long enough."

"Yeah, but I beat Gary here, like I said I would."

Gary said nothing, letting Ash have his moment. Something flashed in Ash's eyes, and he cupped her face with his free hand. "I knew you'd beat that asshole. I knew you would."

Lily's throat hitched. "I know you did."

He leaned in and kissed her dirty forehead gently, and she could have melted right there.

Something nudged Ash, and all of a sudden a bundle of yellow jumped into Lily's arms and began licking her cheek.

"ChuChu!" she exclaimed.

Pika scampered up Ash's shoulder and squeaked happily.

"These two saved my ass back there," Ash said. "I wouldn't be here without them."

Lily's eyes watered as she hugged ChuChu. "I'm so glad you're okay."

Ash stumbled forward and jostled them all. "Oh, and this is Zapdos."

Lily blinked and her vision focused over Ash's shoulder. A colossal bird with sunken, black eyes stared down at her. Its belly was mottled and bleeding from some kind of attack it had taken, but it stood tall and proud regardless. Lily gaped at it.

"Oh my god..."

"If you think that's cool, meet Articuno," Ivy said.

Lily turned to see a jet-black creature with a cruel beak and crueler eyes looking down at the party. It had frozen the water underfoot and stood on the ice, Wigglytuff in between its massive talons. Beside it, the Fire Bird Moltres seemed unconcerned with the water as it shifted its weight and leaned its sharp beak beside Gary, nudging him lightly.

"I... I'm..." Lily had no words.

"So, where's Charizard? I hope he wasn't too much of a pain in the

ass," Ash said with a smile.

Tyranitar and Aerodactyl had managed to wade toward the group and Ivy and Gary assessed their wounds, whispered reassurances. Lily's eyes fell as she replayed the memory of Dragonite taking a bite out of Charizard.

"Lily? Where is he?" Ash said again.

Lily sniffled and forced herself to meet his eyes, red eyes that radiated light, hope, possibility where there was none. She searched them, desperate for the right words to help him understand, and he in turn searched for something in her.

"Lily?" he said again, voice wavering.

The tears building behind her eyes burst and fell down her cheeks in thick, hot globules. "Oh Ash, I'm so sorry."

He shook his head. "Sorry for what? Where's Charizard?"

Lily choked on a sob, the despair and hopelessness she'd felt watching Charizard's brutal end returning with a vengeance. "He s-saved my life. He beat the control, he was incredible. He was s-so brave."

Ash just stared at her, and she watched the change in him. Incredulous, then confused, and finally denial. "No, that's just...no. Charizard's a stubborn ass, he'd eat a guy like Lance for breakfast. Charizard!"

He called out for Charizard, disturbing Pikachu on his shoulder. Ivy covered her mouth to stifle a sob as she understood and accepted what Ash could not. Gary trudged through the water and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Ash," he said softly.

Ash violently whacked his arm away. "Get off me! I gotta find Charizard! He's out there hiding from all the rain. He hates water, you know?"

Lily watched Ash pace, yell for Charizard, water sloshing at his knees. She hiccupped and covered her mouth, afraid to let him see her grief.

"Ash," she said through her sobbing.

"He's a tough old bastard," Ash went on. "He'd never... He couldn't

be..."

Pikachu squeaked at Ash's shoulder, and he showed the group his back. It was Zapdos's gentle nudging that finally broke Ash out of his trance, and he turned to the legendary bird.

"Is this what it's like?" he said softly. "Watching them all go while you remain here forever, alone?"

Zapdos watched him with those sunken, dark eyes, but Lily could not read them. It lowered its head in what could only be construed as a bow, a show of deference, eyes downcast, and Ash lifted a shaking hand to pat its head. His hat hid the look in his eyes.

"Charizard's...gone?"

Lily's breath hitched, the tears burning her eyes and each breath a stab to the gut through her broken ribs. "He died a hero."

Ash looked up at her, and the sight of his tears broke her heart.

"*There* is *such a thing as heroes. They're the ones that're the most scared, and they still stand up and fight."*

"Yeah," he said. "I couldn't see him any other way."

Ivy's strong arm wrapped around Lily's shoulders and supported her as she cried, and Gary went to Ash but didn't try to support him. It was enough just to be there, the four of them and the legends they had made real, among the shoals and rocking waves.

"Scaly's gone, too," Lily whispered to Ivy so the boys wouldn't hear. "He was so brave, and I..."

"Listen to me," Ivy said, holding her close. "You did what none of us coulda done. You faced Lance. Scaly and Charizard and all the others? They trusted you, and they fought for you because they believed in you. And you won. *You* won, Lily, not me or Gary or Ash, *you.* If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't have had an opening to beat Lugia. We won't forget them or what happened here, not ever."

Lily heard her words, drank them in, but they would never quite be enough. Maybe what had happened here today had saved the world, maybe it had prevented mass genocide. Maybe it meant something. But looking at Ash and hearing Gary's hushed words of consolation and reassurance falling on deaf ears, it wasn't quite enough. They had

lost something here today, something none of them would ever get back.

They waited in the shallows for the rescue boats. Cinnabar had contacted the Orange Navy, and a fleet of destroyers and cruisers was headed for Shamouti now, drawn by the brilliant false sun that had signaled Lugia's demise. Help was on the way.

The birds left the group not long after the excitement died down, returning to their islands. Zapdos was the last to go, its sunken eyes fixed on Ash, but it followed its brethren back to their haunts to heal. Would they sleep? Or would they wander the world in search of that which we all search for—a purpose, a reason for living, something worth fighting for? Only one thing was certain: the legendary birds were legends for a reason. They would not succumb to the whims of men, no matter how well intentioned. Some monsters could not be tamed.

Lily stood alone with Pikachu on her shoulder. The lights of the rescue boats blinked on the dark horizon in the distance—it wouldn't be long now. She stood at the edge of the ruined coast, the water sloshing at her thighs. No matter where she looked, there was no sign of him. Lance was gone, spirited away by the mighty ocean, perhaps never to be heard from again.

Gone, and he'd taken with him the one thing she'd always craved without even knowing it.

Pikachu squeaked at Lily's shoulder, concerned, and Lily patted it with her hand. Her other hand rested at her hip where her Pokéballs were securely fastened. There was Dragonair, then Kingdra's now empty ball. Omastar and Dodrio were still in Cinnabar, and she had returned Tyranitar and Aerodactyl to Ivy and Gary. Even Ash had accepted Charizard's empty Ultra Ball without a word. In its place was the strange Pokéball marked with a silver star Lily had found by chance among the shoals. She unclipped it and held it up in front of her, and she thought of Lance.

"*You could stay with me...*"

"You chose your own fate," she said. "I guess in the end, you weren't worth it."

The Pokéball in her hand was heavy, but she didn't release it. There was no need. Lance had lost something, too, in their confrontation, but it remained to be seen whether his loss was her gain. It remained

to be seen what would become of her once the Orange Navy rescued their group.

"*You're one hell of a girl."*

His voice, the offer he'd made her, the soft admissions, words she'd never thought she would ever hear, haunted her. They followed her as the Orange naval officers helped her onto a stretcher to the medical ward on the ship for emergency treatment on the way back to Kumquat Island.

And yet...

And yet...

Lance the Dragon Master, the best of his kind, the best of *their* kind, was gone without a trace. And yet...

Lily covered her ears as she lay in her cot, the boat rocking gently with the sea as it made passage.

"*You're a Titan for true. Just like me."*

Just like me.

Lily cried herself to sleep, and she dreamed of drifting in the dark ocean, her hand reaching for anything that would save her from drowning.

And Lance, reaching back.

Offering.

30. Epilogue: An Ocean Apart

Triumvirate, Epilogue: An Ocean Apart
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Kanto and Johto reeled in the wake of Lance's downfall and how close they had come to total annihilation. The thin veil between myth and reality had been pierced, and both continents had the catalyst they had long needed to finally cauterize the rotten wound that had slowly and insidiously taken root since the ceasefire at the end of the Great War. In Lance's quest to systematically eradicate all Tamers, he had inadvertently provided a rallying point for the litiginous continents and paved the way for real change and progress, a true end to the Great War.

Team Rocket was finished. Marco, Ethan, and Lyra had disposed of Gym Leader Pryce, also known as the Masked Man, with the help of the legendary beasts Entei, Raikou, and Suicune. Ho-oh was freed from Pryce's control and retreated to its empyrean kingdom, and the three beasts, finally awakened from their death-like sleep, were free to roam the wilds of Johto unencumbered.

Marco, carrying the mantle of his late father's legacy and the ruin it left in its wake, took it upon himself to right wrongs and redeem Team Rocket, the only thing that remained to him of Giovanni. We cannot choose our parents, but we can choose who to be in spite of them. Marco would not let Giovanni's specter haunt him for the rest of his life, and so with Lyra's help, he set out to recruit the members of the now disbanded Team Rocket and offer them a chance at redemption.

Jessie, the Rocket Agent that had hounded Ash and his friends relentlessly throughout their journey, was one such recruitee. Having barely survived the Battle of Cinnabar, her broken body was found under Yanmega's corpse after it had crash-landed abetting Giovanni's ruined escape. The Bug's tough carapace had protected and unconscious Jessie from the ongoing hostilities around her until Cinnabar rescue scouts unearthed her and brought her to the hospital. With her old partner dead and no one to answer to, Jessie grudgingly accepted Marco's terms and turned her flair for violence on rogue agents who refused to turn themselves in. It turned out she was a natural at hunting down her old colleagues and persuading them to see things differently. In exchange for her loyalty, Marco agreed to keep her out of prison. For now.

Ethan took a different route from his friends and decided to work for the new Indigo League, Johto Division. He was appointed head Johto Ranger under the direct authority of the new Elite Four, which had brought together some of Johto's and Kanto's most talented and infamous Tamers. Surge, recovered from the Siege of Saffron, relocated to Indigo Plateau and assumed leadership of the new Elite Four by unanimous vote from the Kanto Gym Leaders. Chuck of Cianwood was likewise unanimously selected by his Johto colleagues to represent their interests at Indigo Plateau. As for the remaining two spots, Agatha insisted on Ash's appointment to take her place, and in a move that shocked all who knew him, Blaine of Cinnabar wrote a strongly-worded letter of recommendation to the sixteen Johto and Kanto Gym Leaders nominating Lily to take over Lance's old position. It was by rights hers for ousting the previous Champion, just as Lance had ousted the Champion before him.

No one was more surprised than Lily herself, however, who realized as soon as she'd been offered the position that it was exactly what she wanted going forward. A chance to continue her research her way but with the power to make her own decisions and lead her own projects with private funding was all she had ever dreamed of. The Elite Four were the keepers of the peace, and in her mind there was no better way to do so than to lead by example in a field that was constantly forging new paths into a better future.

As for Gary, his sister Daisy, who knew Gary better than he knew himself, was the one to suggest that he settle in Viridian, take over the Gym that had been neglected for so long under Giovanni. Marco was more than happy to hand over the title, having never wanted it in the first place, and Brock and Misty were relieved to have a proven and trustworthy ally so close to their backyards.

Ivy took on the role of head Kanto Ranger for Indigo Plateau, a job which took her all over Kanto liaising with the Gym Leaders, both old and new, and reporting to Ethan, her counterpart in Johto, and to the new Elite Four annually. Viridian became her base of operations, where she lived with Gary in the remodeled Viridian Gym.

"It's home," she told Janine as they sat together on the roof of the Fuchsia Gym sharing a blanket and a bottle of wine. "It's a place that's ours."

Janine popped a takoyaki ball into her mouth with a toothpick and lay back in her chair. The stars over Fuchsia were bright on this cloudless night, so unlike Ivy's first night in this city so long ago. "Is it

at all weird to be living in Giovanni's old house?"

"Is it weird living in your father's house?"

Janine looked at Ivy askance, her mask discarded for the night as she lounged in a billowy, violet gi that matched the poisoned fingers of her right hand that she kept carefully wrapped up under a layer of bandages. "The memories live here. It isn't weird, but I can feel them. They're everywhere."

Sometimes Ivy would wake up in the middle of the night next to Gary in the master bedroom, where Giovanni had once slept, and she couldn't see anything. It was as dark as the cramped cell in the Masked Man's lair, inky and oppressive, and for a few moments she could not breathe. Until her eyes adjusted and Gary's hand found hers, her dreams having leaked into his and woken him from slumber, and she remembered.

"Yeah," she said softly. "I know exactly what you mean."

"Okay, I've got more wine," Gary said as he climbed the narrow fire escape steps to the roof to rejoin the girls. Technically he was supposed to remain in Viridian now, but he'd joined Ivy for the Fuchsia leg of her trip like he usually did. They never spoke about it, never needing to. It was just something he did, something he needed to do. Like Janine and Ivy, Gary remembered, too. "Where'd you put the corkscrew?"

"Catch." Janine tossed it to him, and Gary almost dropped it.

"Hey! Damnit, I almost dropped the bottle. You know I can't see well out here," Gary grumbled.

Janine and Ivy grinned at each other.

He took his seat on Ivy's other side and refilled everyone's glasses. Espeon stretched out at his feet and sniffed at the plate of takoyaki, lost interest, then sat down and lazily sniffed the air. A small Eevee twitched its ears and stood up, mimicking Espeon's every move and watching it adoringly. It yawned and mewled, fighting to keep its eyes open. It was still so young.

Ivy smiled and scooped Eevee up. "Don't worry, little guy. One day, you'll be able to stay up later even than Espeon."

"He's cute," Janine said. "You didn't have an Eevee the last time I saw

you."

"Yeah. Gary found this little guy in the Viridian Forest a few weeks ago and gave him to me for my birthday. He's young, but he's got guts."

She scratched Eevee behind the ears, and Gary's hand found hers silently. He said nothing, but he didn't have to. It was enough to remember, and it was okay to move forward.

The Elite Four's downfall hit Kanto and Johto hard, but most of all Blackthorn. Lance, the pride of the Taki Dynasty, perhaps the greatest Dragon Tamer of the century, had committed barbarous treason, betraying his country and, more importantly, his clan. Blackthorn, under Clair's cool and shrewd leadership, focused its efforts on curbing the international opprobrium laid upon it when news of Lance's treachery spread. Never a popular group among the plebs, the non-Tamer population, and targets of invidious scorn by most of their fellow Tamers, Clair and the Titans of Blackthorn were quick to publicly distance themselves from Lance and his actions.

The excuses were so well rehearsed that even Clair had begun to believe some of them. He'd been out of the clan's reach for years, surrounded only by his fellow Elites and susceptible to Team Rocket's pernicious influence. He was estranged from his family, had been since childhood when he witnessed the brutal murder of his father during the Great War as the man cried and begged for mercy, shameful—no one wanted anything to do with the son of a coward. He was mentally unstable, a misanthrope and a sociopath, elegant and charming on the outside—the worst ones always are, aren't they? Whatever the media wanted to hear, Blackthorn eagerly fed them the flummery with a healthy dollop of shock and disdain. No one had *ever* suspected! No, not even the Elder, who'd mentored Lance since the latter's youth. Not even his cousin, Clair, anointed Gym Leader of Blackthorn with whom he'd grown up.

In private, Clair entertained clandestine meetings with representatives from the Apep and Fafnir Dynasties in Kalos and Unova, respectively, as well as the self-made Dragon Master Drake of Hoenn, who personally paid Clair a visit to offer his condolences and help himself to Blackthorn's hospitality. The entire time Clair had to entertain the self-important *fortynblod* who'd somehow waded his way to the deeper end of the gene pool and ended up with extraordinary control out of sheer dumb luck, she imagined maiming and killing him in creative

and gruesome ways.

"Don't worry your pretty head over it too much," the uncouth sailor drawled as he happily drank his way through the Gym's supply of scotch like it might cure whatever latest venereal disease he'd picked up. "Men like Lance, they're born with a silver spoon in their mouths. And sooner or later, they'll end up choking on it."

He laughed at his own cleverness and sawed off a chunk of grilled Corphish with a shrimp fork and a steak knife, the melted butter and garlic marinade slicking his mustachios and making them shine as brightly as his flat, fleshy nose. Clair fantasized about reaching across the table and shoving the tiny shrimp fork in his left eyeball to the pearl-tipped hilt.

Instead of indulging her sadistic fantasy, she smiled with those perfect, painted lips and looked at him through her lashes. "Oh, I'm sure there was no choking involved. Despite his tragic end, Lance was raised to use his spoon and any other tool with the proper grace and finesse of any trueborn clan Titan."

Drake choked on a bit of food badly, and his face turned red. A server brought a wet towel and patted his back to try to help him, but he glared, red-faced and sweating, at Clair across the table. She got up abruptly, cold, blue eyes looking down at him over her nose, and politely excused herself with a bow. Graceful, as any trueborn Titan of one of the three clans.

Brownnosing swine, she thought furiously as she exited the dining room.

Drake, like the rest of the Hoenn Titans, was the product of generations of *vanithers*, deserters who abandoned their families and resettled in Hoenn in disgrace. They were the thin blooded *skuffs* and the *fortynblods*, the ones who could not manifest the requisite mastery to earn them the title of proper Titan. They were the failures and the cowards, the bastards and the exiled, the ones who clamored for change and turned tail and ran when things didn't go their way. Sure, over the years some had been born with the Old Blood strong in their veins, like Drake, and risen to prominence. But they were a different species now, the clan's teachings and wisdom lost on them. She pitied them, but she had also hoped a man like Drake who had proven himself enough of a nuisance to Hoenn's Champion, Steven Stone, to get him on the radar would have realized the value of friends. Steven was famously not a fan of Titans.

Clair made her way through the Gym to the private living quarters. Her grandfather, the Elder, would hear of her behavior with Drake and dispatch someone to wipe the filmy butter from his chin and pour him some more scotch. The Elder might chide her for rudeness in this sensitive time, but the old curmudgeon was even less enthusiastic about those filthy *vanithers* masquerading around Hoenn and tarnishing the pedigree the three great clans had cultivated over the centuries.

Clair entered her room and discarded her blazer on her four-poster bed, leaving her clad in only a navy, cotton dress, sensibly sensuous, and black pumps. She let her hair out of the elaborate pin-up and tied it back in a simple ponytail. The hand-carved cabinet next to her walk-in closet was filled with crystal bottles, each partially filled with liquid in various shades of amber and gold and dark, earthy brown. She selected the lightest, a syrupy, honeyed bourbon brewed in Azalea and poured herself a glass, two shots worth, and downed it all in as many gulps. It went down smooth, smoky and a little sweet, but the kick burned as it hit her stomach and cleared her sinuses. She liked the ones with a little fire in them.

Refilling her glass, she caught a glimpse of herself in the generous vanity and studied her reflection. Twenty-nine and blessed with the Old Blood that had made her grandfather proud when it manifested at the age of four, Clair was in the prime of her youth, beauty, and power. She was admired and envied, feared and coveted. An esteemed Gym Leader and suddenly heir-apparent to the Taki Dynasty's geriatric Elder. But there were faint dark circles under her eyelids that softened the sharp edges of her icy eyes and made her appear gaunt in the waning sunlight. Away from prying eyes, she glared at her reflection and let a whiff of her inner furor seep out past those libidinous, red lips.

"How dare you do this to me," she whispered. "To our family. How dare you."

Lance had been the golden boy, the favored son who had pulled himself up by his bootstraps in the shadow of his father's unending ignominy after the war. He had the gift, but so did many other trueborn children of the Taki Dynasty. Lance was an ocean apart from them all. There was hardly a day when Clair, of an age with her cousin, didn't see him outside, in the winding, subterranean caverns of the Dragon's Den shrine or up in the Ice Path where the Dragons' greatest enemies called home. He was always training, always pushing himself.

"*Why do you always go to the Ice Path?"* she'd asked him once when he came back, his fingers purple-speckled with frostbite and his little body shaking uncontrollably, with his young Dratini bravely by his side. *"Dragons don't like ice and cold."*

He'd looked at her across that ocean that separated him from the others, even from her—wondering at the distance but never caring to turn back and cross it. *"That's exactly why we go."*

Somewhere in her child's mind, Clair had gotten the ugly impression that he was calling her chicken for not training in the harsh conditions like he did, so she proved him wrong and took Horsea and her own Dratini to the edge of the Ice Path one day, following Lance at a safe distance so he wouldn't notice her. But she didn't know the caves like he did. She didn't expect Horsea to nearly freeze to death in the frigid, underground rivers and lakes where wild Dewgong made their homes. She didn't expect to slip and fall into those waters and be carried under a sheet of ice in the current, Dratini too cold to fend off the barking Dewgong that grew angry at her accidental intrusion. And she didn't expect Lance to smash through the ice with the help of a pair of wild Lapras under his control, an extraordinary feat for such a young Titan.

The blue Dragon descendants chased off the Dewgong while Lance himself hauled Clair out of the freezing water. He carried her out of the Ice Path using a shortcut he knew. He got her to the Elder, their grandfather, and saw her whisked to the hot springs that bubbled softly in the Dragon's Den to stave off the hypothermia. He saved her life, and he never said a word about it thereafter.

Clair turned away from the mirror, its edges misted in her vision with the ebbing tide of memory. She kicked off her pumps and padded barefoot to the sliding doors that opened up into the sheltered garden. A hardwood paneled, covered porch stretched around the perimeter of the garden, and other private rooms opened up onto the same porch. The garden was moss-covered and peppered with drooping willows, their long, trailing branches floating in the still, deep ponds that twisted underground to the Dragon's Den.

Her Dragonite slumbered under one of the trees, snoring softly, its thick tail submerged in the water, while her Kingdra waded in the middle of one of the larger ponds nearly covered in small, green leaves that floated on the surface and completely obscured it, like a crocodile patiently scouting for unassuming prey. Clair took a small sip of her drink, this time savoring the heady mixture of smoke and

honey and lightning.

The garden was quiet at this time of day while most of the handful of people with access to it were busy with dinner, and Clair had often come here to think and be alone. Her grandfather disapproved of her drinking habit, which wasn't so much a habit as a hobby, but like most people of that greying generation, he was stuck in his antediluvian traditions and happy to force others to wallow in the wagon rut with him. Clair had never done more than what was absolutely necessary to keep his favor and peace, stealing moments for herself whenever possible. As Gym Leader, she had more and more free rein to run things her way.

With Lance out of the picture, there was no need to keep up pretenses around the Elder, she thought belatedly. The incident with Drake would be resolved without more than a light slap on the wrist. The taste of her drink soured in her throat, and she took another, larger sip to wash out the rotten aftertaste of Lance's betrayal.

Something shuddered in the grass far to the left—the garden was nearly a mile across to accommodate the Dragons' communal lounging habits and for the residents' privacy—and Clair's hawk-like eyes narrowed at the source. Icy blue landed easily on the eyesore in the Elysian sanctuary as it bumbled about and tore up moss and mushroom and lilypad without discrimination, purely by accident. The creature noticed Clair—its senses as keen as any true Dragon's—and turned its heavy head. Its bladed mandible sliced clean through a drooping willow branch as though it were nothing but spider's silk, and the severed limb tumbled into the small pond from which the beast had been drinking with a slurp.

Clair padded toward it, blue eyes locked on its guillotine skull. "The things we do for a drink and some peace."

"Or at least just the drink."

Clair stopped and searched. She hadn't even seen the other woman. A figure rose from her spot under the same willow tree the ungainly Dragon had desecrated and tucked a thick tress of violet, nearly black hair behind her ear, though it immediately fell about her cheek, disobedient.

"The right company is better than any amount of peace and quiet," Clair conceded. "Have you been hiding out here again, Iris?"

Iris grinned, and her dark, almond eyes crinkled in a way that

reminded Clair of her mixed blood, more than the hammered copper tone of her skin, which positively glowed in the waning sunlight, or the slight hitch of an accent—the almost imperceptible roll of an r, the subtle gasp of a hanging consonant that wanted to give way to a smoother vowel—diminished over the years spent living in Blackthorn. Clair and her ilk didn't smile like that, like the sun had risen just for her.

"Cheers to that. And no, I'm not hiding. The Elder kindly asked me to make myself scarce while that Hoenn Titan is skulking around. Haxorus likes the garden."

How subtle of my dear grandfather.

Iris wore a sleeveless white shift belted around her slim waist with a brown leather strap. Her thick hair, the color of crushed violets, was yanked back in a messy ponytail that reached her butt, full and round between shapely hips with just enough sway to draw the eye's stare for a tempting look. She was short, barely two inches over five feet, and was constantly looking up at Clair and the other men and women whose home and table she had shared for the better part of her twenty-three-year life. It was cruelly fitting, Clair thought, that this half breed would always be looking up at those born a notch above her in the pecking order. The Elder would make sure of it, in any case. Another one for the wagon rut.

Iris's Haxorus was the only one of its kind in Johto, the species alien to this continent and the next. Iris had brought it with her as a tiny Axew trembling in her eight-year-old arms in the middle of the night, her spirit tired from the clandestine flight from Unova, those almond eyes wide with fear but as dry as they were now even as her mother beseeched the Elder on Iris's behalf. She was just a child, innocent and malleable, obedient. She had the gift, just test her. Didn't he know who her father was?

The Elder had agreed to offer Iris and her mother asylum once he saw Iris's latent potential for mastering the Old Blood's powers. It was strong in her veins despite her mother's inferior half. There was no turning away a child with potential, even a *tacha*, a tainted halfblood, like Iris. Another one for the wagon rut, indeed.

But Clair had always had a soft spot for Iris hidden somewhere in her sharp, severe angles and safe from the layer of ice that kept her running at a chilly and constant level of fuck-off. Despite their age gap, Iris was quick. She was a fast learner, dedicated in a way Clair

envied, in the darkest depths of her private thoughts, and what she lacked in status and skin color and connections, she more than made up for sheer fucking determination. Iris was as hard headed as her Haxorus, cutting through anything that stood in the way of what she wanted for herself and, until just three years after Blackthorn had taken her in, what her late mother wanted for her, too. Perhaps constantly looking up at those around her made it easier to keep her eyes on the sky and shoot for heights others just laughed at.

Clair wasn't laughing.

"Come on," Clair said, the bad taste fading from her mouth the more Iris watched her. "I'll even pour for you myself."

"I'm star struck, truly."

Clair cracked a smile and led Iris back to her room, where she filled two glasses with the golden, liquid fire. They sat together with their feet dangling over the edge of the porch, toes dusting the moist moss and short, pink flowers that kissed them dewily.

"I take it you didn't play nice with Drake," Iris said, breaking the comfortable silence as they watched the sun slowly set. Electric lanterns buzzed to life about the garden and bathed it in soft, orange light.

"The bastard wouldn't know peanut butter from shit spread thin," Clair said.

She realized her mistake too late, but Iris did her the immense courtesy of laughing anyway, ignoring the slip.

"When I'm in Hoenn, remind me never to eat the food," Iris said.

If Clair were anybody else, Iris probably would have gotten up and walked away, offering some demure excuse like she had been trained to do, just as all women growing up under the Taki Dynasty's rule. But behind those almond eyes that hadn't cried the night she showed up on Blackthorn's doorstep without a last name or a country to call home simmered a fierce and elemental temper, expertly hidden and released only in short, imperceptible bursts to those who knew where to look. Clair knew where to look. She returned the courtesy and didn't apologize for her slip. No need to remind Iris of what she was reminded every day she was here instead of in the home she still believed waited for her an ocean away.

"When?" Clair asked.

Iris shifted beside her and lay back on her palms, her eyes skyward like they always were. "It's on the way to Unova from here. I'll have to stop to restock."

Clair kept her expression carefully schooled. *Not this again.*

"Unova," she repeated. "And how will you get there?"

"By ship, obviously."

"Whose ship?"

Iris looked at her pointedly, but Clair didn't budge. *This is for your own good.*

"This is the perfect time to go," Iris said, lowering her voice to that raspy whisper that preceded the hurricane of her temper. "After what happened with Lance, the Elder will be culling Blackthorn for more traitors. Where do you think he'll start?"

Despite her illusions of grandeur, Iris was nothing if not acutely aware of her situation, painfully pragmatic. Clair didn't have to answer her question. They both knew exactly where the Elder would begin looking for signs of disloyalty and duplicity.

She almost laughed at the thought. Titans rooting out treachery among their ranks was like burning down a chicken coop with the chickens in it just to keep the foxes away.

"I'm the Gym Leader," Clair said steadily, trying a different angle. "And now I'm the heir."

I can protect you.

"I don't want your protection." Iris read her meaning easily. "I want what's rightfully mine. I thought you of all people could understand that."

Bastards can't wear crowns. Clair kept the thought to herself, but she didn't have to. Iris knew the argument, the *reality*, and she stubbornly would not accept it.

"Of course I understand. But Opelucid is no different from Blackthorn. You know our ways. You know they haven't changed for a thousand years."

Iris's eyes flashed with the first harsh winds of the hurricane bottled up inside her. "Then I'll change them. Opelucid's weak. It hasn't recovered after the Red Plague hit fifteen years ago."

The Red Plague, an insidious disease that spread through bodily discharge and killed in seven days, had wiped out almost three quarters of the Fafnir Dynasty's ranks in Opelucid City. It broke out just after Iris and her mother fled the city, the Dragons breathing fire at their heels now that Iris's father was no longer around to protect them. The clan had not been the same since, relying on mercenaries to pad their emaciated ranks until the next generation could come of age, which would not be for another couple of decades. Most of those killed during the epidemic were children under the age of thirteen.

"Opelucid may still be recovering," Clair allowed, "but they have a strong leader."

She dared not mention Drayden's name out loud around Iris. Just the thought of the snowy-haired monarch and what he had done to Iris and her family stoked the hurricane inside her and sent her into an incandescent rage. Age and the very real consequences of losing control behind the Taki Dynasty's walls had tempered Iris's volatile emotions, but with Clair she felt less of a need for restraint. That was what friends were for.

"He's not the rightful king, *I* am. And I'll prove it him, to everyone. You'll see, Clair. I'll show you something none of you have ever seen before."

"*You'll see.*"

Lily's voice echoed Iris's in the fog of Clair's memory. The bubbly blonde had, against all the odds in the universe, done the impossible. The stories were always different, the details never lining up. But the endings were all the same: Lily Kida, the *fortynblod* scientist that had slipped through the cracks of Blackthorn's iron-clad walls had bested Lance the Dragon Master. Just like she promised she would do.

When Clair had heard the story, she didn't believe it. It took separate accounts, first from one of the Orange Navy commanders that had personally sailed to the remains of Shamouti to recover the four young trainers that had dared to confront Lance and his demon, then from Morty, who had heard it directly from Ash Ketchum himself, and finally from Blaine, the Cinnabar Gym Leader and technically Lily's boss in her little science lab. Lily had beaten Lance.

And she had lived to tell about it.

Acceptance came and went. Some days were better than others, the days when Clair let her personal indignance smolder. Lance had betrayed Kanto and Johto, the clan, everyone. But most of all, he'd betrayed her. Other days she found herself defending him to herself. He had to have his reasons. Lance always had his reasons, even when he pulled her out of that icy death trap when they were kids and never mentioned it again. His silence was all the encouragement Clair needed to shape up and take her training seriously. In a way, she was Gym Leader now because of the shadow Lance cast over her as she watched his back, furiously sprinting to catch up no matter how long it took.

But now, nearly two months since the debacle at Shamouti and endless PR campaigns and speeches later, Clair was exhausted. Reality was a bitch, and it had plenty of sisters. Lance was gone, she was still here, and he'd left her a hell of a mess to clean up. Ironically, the fact that Lily was a Titan formerly of Blackthorn had been the lifeline Clair clung to as she vehemently defended the Taki Dynasty, her family and her home, with her usual scathing candor.

Titans clean up their own problems. Titans will always wield the scalpel of justice and cut out the rot that infects their impregnable ranks. Blackthorn is just as outraged as the rest of you, don't you see? We're not the enemy! The enemy is lying in pieces at the bottom of a black ocean, relegated to myth alongside his demented sea monster at the hands of one of our own. One of *us*.

Lily never officially commented. She never reached out to Blackthorn, never acquiesced to interviews. She never rebutted any of Blackthorn's claims as to her lineage, her ties back to the ancient clan. And eventually, the world began to settle for the idea that maybe there really was nothing to refute. It would take many more months, but already Clair could feel the boulder reaching the top of the mountain, and with some more carefully executed strategy that she would personally handle with as little involvement from the Elder as possible, she was confident she could push the boulder over the peak to tumble down the other side.

She did see now. It was foggy, and on her worst nights the haze of alcohol and tears and bitterness clouded the image. But she was beginning to see it. Lance had drifted too far off in that ocean that lay between them, and he'd paid the price. Clair would not make the same mistake with Iris. She would not let her drown out there alone when

there was something she could do, something she had chosen not to do for Lily when she had the chance.

"The last time someone told me that, I dismissed it as pretty fantasy," Clair said. "It was my own fault for not trusting her resolve."

Iris's maelstrom abated, a false respite in the eye of the storm, and she peered at Clair. "What're you saying?"

Clair downed the rest of her drink, savoring the buzz that took the edge off the clusterfuck she'd been immersed in for the past couple of months. With Iris, at least, she could have a little faith. That was what friends were for, right?

"I'm saying I'll give you a ship and a crew to sail it. But you'll have to stomach the food in Hoenn. You're right about resupplying."

Iris gaped at her, and Clair was reminded of her relatively young age, so carefully hidden under the layers of marble and razor blades with which all Titans growing up in Blackthorn had to harden their hides.

"You're serious."

Clair leaned back on her palms, mimicking Iris's pose and looked to the sky, wondering if she would see what Iris saw in its hazy, indigo depths. Wondering if Lily had seen it, too, when she gazed across the vast ocean at Lance.

"Ask me again and I might change my mind," Clair said.

Iris swallowed, believing the threat. "The Elder..."

"The Elder is frail and dying. He won't last more than another year, maybe two at best. No one will question me. Not anymore."

Speaking out against the Elder was tantamount to treason, even for Clair. But after everything that had happened with Lance, the entire game had changed. Allegiances forged in shadows and blood shifted. If Lance, the Elder's favorite, could fall so magnificently, what did that mean for those who followed in his footsteps? Clair had been playing the game long enough to smile through her misery. Iris was only just beginning to understand.

Haxorus lumbered over toward the two lounging women, its red eyes half-lidded as it looked around for a comfortable patch of moss on which to lie down and sleep. Its approach disturbed Dragonite's

slumber, and Kingdra sank below the surface.

"So you believe I can do it?" Iris asked, her hurricane barricaded and the child in her, the innocent that had always admired Clair, held her breath and waited for the approval she never got from the others.

"I believe you're a Titan for true," Clair said, meaning it.

It was all that mattered.

What did she see in him?

Clair thought of what it must have been like for Lily, a diluted *vander*, separated from the clan, to face Lance, the best of them all.

What did he see in her?

"Thank you, Clair," Iris said, her toes skimming the pink flowers and shedding dew on the moss. Haxorus curled its armored, yellow tail around itself, one eye checking on Iris before it dozed off. Iris kept her eyes resolutely skybound. "Thank you."

Clair didn't smile or give Iris any reassurances. The girl didn't need them. She was determined like hell, and a little ocean wasn't going to stop her.

Maybe Lance saw in Lily what I see in you.

They stayed that way, sitting together and enjoying the silence and their drinks and memorizing it, this feeling, the two of them, until the stars came out.

Indigo Plateau was quiet at night, like you might expect any small mountain town to be. But the lights of the town below were what reminded Lily of Cinnabar, of home. This was her home now, she supposed. That was okay. The Rangers that manned the Indigo Keep were courteous and candid, but never gossipy. They never asked about Shamouti, about her involvement. Maybe they knew something of what it was like, to face an Elite and come out alive. They'd lived with Lance and the others for years. They knew a thing or two about keeping their heads.

But it was really Ash's presence that made the transition as smooth as it had been. After recovering at Cinnabar in Blaine's personal clinic in Mt. Cinnabar—his insistence, not hers—Lily had retrieved Omastar

and Dodrio and headed for Indigo Plateau together with Ash, making a short stop in Viridian City on the way to help Gary settle into his new role as Gym Leader.

She liked it here, the mountains and the crisp air and the quiet. It surprised her how much she liked it. She had freedom here, to work in a lab of her own and to pursue what interested her, to do something important that would help people and Pokémon. Finding a cure for Mewtwo's disease was chief among the new projects she had begun preliminary research on. She would try, she promised herself. No matter how long it took, she would not give up. She was no longer under the yoke of Cinnabar Labs' pre-approved projects and guarded funding. The Indigo Plateau coffers were abundant thanks to a generous donation from Celadon, something about maintaining a vested interest. Ash had told Lily not to worry about it, that the Celadon Gym Leader Erika was okay in his book, and she left it at that, trusting his judgment. One day, perhaps, she would hear his side of the story about everything before she'd met him. One day.

Ash was due back today. He'd left in a hurry about a week ago when he received word that his mother, Delia Ketchum, was responding well to an experimental treatment and might wake up from her long coma in the Pewter hospital.

Winter was fast approaching, but Lily savored the chill as she snuggled under a blanket and sat on the spacious balcony outside the gold and red accented Saffron Solar. Getting comfortable with a glass of wine and enjoying some quiet time alone, she selected two Pokéballs from her belt. The first one released Dragonair, who slithered over the rug Lily had lain out over the stone floor.

"Hi, Tiny," she said with a smile. "It's not too cold for you, right?"

Dragonair gently nudged her with its snout, and she hugged its large head. The remaining Pokéball was still in her hand, and she hesitated. It was marked with a silver star, the same one she had found on Shamouti Island after her battle with Lance.

"It's okay," Lily said more to herself than to Dragonair. "She'll remember this place."

Lily pressed the release button on the Pokéball, and another Dragonair materialized on the wide, woven rug. This one, however, was female and her scales glowed a pearlescent pink under the moonlight.

Dark eyes shifted warily between Lily and Tiny, still unused to her

new company. When Lily had first released this Dragonair from its Pokéball to be treated at the Cinnabar Pokémon Center, it had tried to attack Nurse Joy in a bout of fear and distress. The staff had to sedate the poor thing just to treat it. Lily spent all her free time once she was mobile again whispering reassurances to the pink Dragonair—Lance's Dragonair—and running her bruised, broken fingers over its magnificent scales. Its coloring was a rare genetic anomaly, according to Nurse Joy. An outcast among its kind.

Lily told herself that was why she'd kept it. It didn't belong with the Titans in Blackthorn any more than she did. But that didn't mean it belonged with her. She could have released it, she supposed. It was strong, it could have survived. Lance had trained it well.

Lance's Dragonair.

She wondered what it saw when it looked at her.

"It's okay, Shiny," Lily called to the pink Dragonair, using the nickname she'd decided on for it. "You remember this place, right?"

Shiny the pink Dragonair tasted the air, its dark eyes swiveling, but it didn't try to attack. Tiny slithered around it but kept a careful distance. This was still new. How would Lance's Pokémon react to Lily's guidance? There was only one way to find out, one day at a time.

Lily held out a hand to Shiny, but she got little more than a wary glance in response. "You miss him, don't you?"

You can't forget him.

Lily let her hand fall. The fingernails she'd ripped off during the battle with Lance were growing back slowly, and her left ring and middle fingers were nothing but stubby nubs of flesh where the nail should have been. The same hand she'd used to slap him in a fit of blind fury.

"*Why is that the only way you can see the world?"*

He had no answer for her. Perhaps he'd never thought about it. Maybe no one had ever asked. Lily's hand shook as she stared at it, lost in the memory, the way Lance had looked at her then, like she was all there was to see and how had he not noticed it before? How had she not?

Why didn't he kill me then?

Something cold nudged her trembling hand, and Lily looked up in surprise. Shiny's snout was cold and wet against her knuckles, and its dark eyes lingered on her like it was looking for something it couldn't quite put its finger on. Lily blinked and ran her hand over its nose without thinking.

"I can't forget him, either," Lily said softly.

"Excuse me, ma'am? The Johto Ranger is here to see you. He's just arrived. Shall I send him up?"

A young man in the Indigo Ranger uniform poked his head out of the door to the balcony, and Lily hid her hand in the folds of her blanket when she faced him.

"Oh, thank you, Jonathan. It's okay, I'll come down. Did you already tell the others?"

Jonathan the Ranger nodded. "Yes, ma'am. They're already downstairs."

Lily shrugged out of her blanket, leaving her only in a knit black sweater and jeans. "I'll be right down."

She headed inside, leaving Tiny and Shiny alone to relax and do as they pleased. Everyone was in the communal Sun Room on the main floor of the Indigo Keep, where guests were invited to lounge with the Elite Four for digestifs and mingling and sometimes musical entertainment. An ancient grand piano sat in the corner opposite the fireplace, but Lily didn't know how to play it.

When she arrived, the first to greet her was her Pikachu.

"ChuChu! Should you be running around like this? It's only been a week!"

ChuChu squeaked happily and scampered about with its usual enthusiasm. Clinging to its back was a small, black and yellow ball of fur about half its size, furry tail erect to help it balance. The tiny Pichu looked up over its mother's head and blinked up at Lily, seemingly unfazed by its boisterous mother's penchant for running around. Lily kneeled down to get a good look at it.

"Wow, you're getting big, Pichu," Lily cooed to the baby Pichu. "Wait'll Ash and Pika get back here. They'll be so excited to see you!"

Pichu's high-pitched squeak was so shrill it was almost impossible for Lily's ears to hear it. She scooped up both Pokémon and walked to the center of the room, where the gathered party awaited her.

"Lily, hey!" Ethan waved to her as though she might not see him otherwise. "Hey, over here!"

ChuChu squeaked happily and jumped out of Lily's arms again, this time to race toward Ethan and the short man standing next to him. Lily smiled warmly at the sight of them both, and Ethan laughed as Pikachu jumped into his arms, sparking lightly.

"Hey, ChuChu, you remember me, huh?" Ethan said.

"That Pikachu could use a firmer hand," said the surly man next to Ethan. "Damn rodent'll electrocute somebody."

"ChuChu's just happy to be up and about after so long being cooped up," Lily said. "You know the feeling, right Lieutenant?"

Surge scowled deeply at Lily, who was of a height with him—a fact he was *not* keen to be reminded of. He stood slightly hunched as he leaned on a gnarled wooden cane, but otherwise he looked much like his old self, cargo pants and camo and dog tags. His scowl stretched the fleshy scar that bisected his face.

"Hmph, I'm not the one with a newborn to look after."

"Huh? Oh, damn! I didn't even notice this little guy!" Ethan examined the baby Pichu clutching its mother's back, and the little rodent tentatively lifted its head and sniffed at his nose. "Hey, buddy. Wow, aren't you a little cutie?"

Pichu wrinkled its nose, and before Lily could even form a coherent thought, Surge yanked her back by the arm and pulled her aside. She barely cleared the danger zone when Pichu sneezed and erupted in a ball of sparks that washed over Ethan and charred the rich, red carpet under his feet.

Coughing, Ethan wiped his nose. His dark hair sparked with static under his backwards cap, but he was otherwise completely unharmed. "Gesundheit, little guy. Damn, what a Spark!"

"Oh my god, Ethan, are you okay?" Lily peeked out from behind Surge. "I'm so sorry!"

Surge rolled his eyes. "That Pichu's young and can't control its electricity. It shouldn't be around people until it's older."

"Aw, it's okay," Ethan said. "It doesn't bother me."

"That's 'cause you're a Fulmen, you moron."

"...Oh, you mean *other* people." Ethan smiled sheepishly.

"Fuckin' shit on a stick." Surge rubbed his eyes.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Lily said, patting his muscled arm lightly. "I think you're right about little Pichu. You'd know better than me."

"That old man? Nah, I think he's gettin' a little soft."

Everyone turned and saw Ash and his Pikachu making their way into the room, still in his traveling clothes, accompanied by the burly Chuck. Lily lit up like the dawn and burst into a bright smile.

"Ash! You're back!"

Ash grinned and scooped her up when she ran toward him, twirling her around in a bear hug. "I missed you."

Lily laughed and he put her down. She boldly kissed him full on the lips, and he tightened his grip in her sweater for the couple seconds that it lasted. It had only been about ten days, but this dreary castle always felt a lot bigger and draftier without him around. "Me too. What happened? Is your mom okay? When can I go with you to see her?"

"Yeah, she's gonna be okay. The doctors said she's responding well to the treatment. They think it's just a matter of time before she wakes up. I'm gonna head back down there in a couple days if you wanna come?"

"Yeah, if that's okay? Oh Ash, I'm so happy your mom's gonna be okay."

He nodded. "Yeah, looks like it. I can hardly believe it. God, I've got so much to tell her."

Pika had run toward Ethan and Surge, and ChuChu jumped down from Ethan's arms so the two of them could huddle around the baby Pichu. Pichu blinked up at Pika, a little wary meeting its father for the first time.

"I think I might cry," Ethan said. "This is so touching."

"Shut the fuck up, kid," Surge said.

"Surge, I see your patience hasn't run out here yet," Chuck said, ambling toward him like a bear.

Chuck had foregone a sweater in spite of the chill. His bare, hairy arms rippled with muscles despite the beer belly he was nursing, but despite appearances Chuck was a master Bellator that even had Clair's respect as a fellow Gym Leader. Jovial and jolly, Chuck was as easygoing as they came. He was always smiling, even when he was getting ready to break someone's arm or bash in their skull.

"I don't know how you put up with this kid for so long. Were you drunk the whole time?"

"Only after five," Ethan said, winking. He reached out and shook Chuck's hand. "Master, it's been a long time. Good to see you."

"Ethan. How's the job? You're not getting soft, are ya? How 'bout a friendly spar before you head off?"

Ethan quailed. "Ah, haha, maybe if I've got the time. But hey, how about some dinner first? The lieutenant here was talking about a new shipment of summer scotch, straight outta Fuchsia. Just arrived today."

Chuck lit up, as Ethan predicted he would, and forgot all about the invitation to beat the crap out of his former student, his idea of a 'friendly spar'. "Why didn't you say so before? Jonathan! Where the hell is everybody? Oi!"

"Hey, lemme take a look at this little guy." Ash kneeled down between the two Pikachu and peered at Pichu. "Wow, he's already so big. How long's it been? I can't believe I missed his birthday!"

Surge bravely resisted the urge to smack Ash over the head with his walking stick. "Jonathan, stop what you're doing and go get my wife."

Jonathan the Ranger, who had appeared at Chuck's bellowed request, bowed stiffly to Surge. "Sir? She's working out in the pool and requested not to be disturbed until dinner—"

"I know what she said, and I don't give a Raticate's ass. You tell her to get her pretty ass in here before I lose my goddamned mind.

Insufferable woman..."

Jonathan hesitated. Who would be more of a hassle to upset, Surge or his intractable wife, Violet? He would send one of the maids to ask her, he decided. Yes, that would be safest.

"Right away, sir." Jonathan excused himself.

"Jonathan! The scotch, don't you forget!"

Jonathan smiled. "I already sent in the request to serve it an hour ago. You'll find it bottled in the sitting room."

Chuck grinned. "Now this is my kinda place." He slapped Surge on the shoulder, but the action ended up knocking the lieutenant off balance.

Raichu, who had been sitting quietly and cleaning itself, bumped Surge's legs and caught him before he could take a tumble. Surge grumbled a string of curses under his breath, willing himself not to get mad at Chuck. The man could break him in half like a used toothpick if he wanted, and Surge wasn't as young as he used to be. Where the fuck was Violet when he needed someone normal to talk to?

"He was born a week ago today," Lily said, kneeling beside Ash. "You just missed it, but he electrocuted Ethan just now."

"Aw, what a cutie."

Ethan kneeled down with them and held out a hand for Pichu. The little furball sniffed him experimentally, looked back between its parents, then back at Ethan, ears drooping. Ethan gently petted its head and earned himself a shy but appreciative squeak.

"Hey guys, I think he kinda likes me!"

Lily looked between Ethan and the little electric rodent. "Hey Ethan, why don't you take Pichu with you when you head back out to Johto?"

"Huh? Wait, seriously?"

"Lt. Surge is right. Pichu's gotta learn how to control its electricity, and me and Ash have a lot to do here. I'd like Pichu to get outside instead of being cooped up in here all the time. And you're Fulmen, so maybe you could help it out better than we could, right?"

Ethan gaped at her. "Seriously? Like, you'd for real let me take Pichu?"

Ash scratched Pika behind the ears. "I think it's a good idea, too. Pika hates being in a Pokéball. If the little guy's anything like his dad, he'll be chompin' at the bit soon enough to go on an adventure."

Ethan looked about ready to burst into tears. "I always wanted one of the Pikachu line! I was telling Lyra pretty recently, actually! Wow, that'd be awesome. I'd love to take little Pichu when he's big enough."

"Then it's settled," Lily said.

"What the hell is the meaning of this?" Violet bellowed from the door to the Sun Room. She was in a sleek one-piece swimsuit with a damp towel around her waist, hair dripping wet, and itching to murder someone. "You *summoned* me? You couldn't wait until I finished my workout?"

Surge, to his credit, hobbled toward her and held his head high. "Woman, don't start."

"Oh, don't you 'woman' me, old man." Violet looked around. "Oh, I see what's going on. You fed up with acting like a normal person already?"

Surge blushed. "You and I gotta very different understandin' of what's normal." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Why the fuck did I agree to this?"

Violet studied him, her anger evaporating, and looped her arm through his. Water dripped from the ends of her bangs onto his shoulder. She spoke softly so no one would overhear them. "Because you're the best in Kanto, and those kids need you and Chuck. Hell, the whole continent needs you. Not Blaine, *you*."

Surge scowled deeply and scratched the uneven stubble that grew around his scar.

"Those kids, they've got a lot of ideas and a lot of heart. But the Gym Leaders are young, here and in Johto. My sister's just twenty-two, and she's not even the youngest. They need someone to point 'em down the right path, direct all that passion where it'll help out the most." She grinned in the way she knew would get her whatever she wanted from the normally intransigent Surge. "Even an old man's got his uses."

Surge gripped his walking stick, his knuckles turning white. Raichu looked up at him, ears drooping. "I am getting old for this."

Violet grabbed his chin and forced him to look up at her, a couple

inches taller than him. "Not to me." Her eyes drifted over his shoulder to Ash, who felt her gaze and waved to her. "And not to them, either."

Before he could pull away, she planted a big, wet kiss on Surge's cheek, dripping more water on his jacket.

"I'm gonna go shower real quick, then I'll be back down, okay? Think you can brave the big, bad kids alone for twenty more minutes?"

Surge was still red in the face, but this time not from anger. "Away with you, woman."

Violet pulled her towel around her shoulders and gave him a nice view of the backs of her bare legs.

"I'll wear something nice," she said, winking as though she could hear his thoughts.

"Here." Ethan picked a Pokéball from his belt and released it.

In a flash of white light, Ethan's Ampharos coalesced on its hind legs. It was a big Pokémon, nearly six feet tall with a long neck and longer tail. Its black and yellow skin was rubbery, but the scarlet pearls on its tail and forehead pulsed faintly with carefully controlled electrical energy. Ampharos could store more electricity without the need to discharge than any other Electric Pokémon in the world. It was small wonder that it had earned its nickname, the Light Pokémon.

"Amphy's been with me since Olivine. Hah, uh, well that's a *long* story for another time. Jasmine's probably still pretty steamed after what happened... But anyway, Amphy came with me after we hightailed it outta there. She's an old Pokémon, about forty, I think, but Ampharos live more'n a hundred years. Crazy, huh? Where was I going with this... Oh, right!"

Ethan handed over Ampharos's Pokéball to Lily.

"Take Amphy for me. She's a good Pokémon, one of my best, but she likes lounging and stuff, not all the runnin' around me and Jolteon do. So I figure she deserves a break, and she'd like it up here. And that way, we'll have a proper trade for Pichu. Say yes?"

Lily stood up and had to look up at Ampharos. She'd never seen one in real life, only in pictures. They were exceedingly rare, taking decades to evolve from their prior evolutionary form, Flaafy. "But Amphy's one of your best Pokémon, you just said so. I can't take your best one!"

"Take it, little lady," Chuck said, having overheard the conversation. "Ampharos is a Dragon descendant. I hear you're pretty good with the half breeds."

He was looking at her carefully, the usual smile on the verge of laughter nothing but a memory, and Lily got a chill. She had refused to talk about her battle with Lance to anyone other than the people closest to her. But everyone knew how Titans fought, and news of Ash's Charizard's death had gotten out upon their return to Cinnabar. Ash had been devastated all over again when Marla casually mentioned that she'd be happy to start drilling him in flying lessons once he was back to a hundred percent.

But Chuck said it like he knew the whole story. Maybe he did. These things had a way of getting out and bubbling over. He must have sensed her hesitation because he smiled his regular smile and slapped her amiably on the back, nearly knocking her over.

"Anyway, Ethan could use the challenge of bringing a baby Pokémon up. He's goin' soft."

Ethan shrugged. "Soft? Nah, I still got it. I even smashed Pryce's ice mask before Lyra could. You'da been proud, Master."

Chucked roared with laughter. "That Lyra girl's got balls, I liked her. You could learn something from her!"

Ash's hand on Lily's shoulder made her jump. It was cold and misted with violet. Gengar's lurid eyes prickled the skin on the back of her neck, and the beginnings of a cackle began to fill the wide room.

"Lily," Ash said.

"It's okay," Lily said, smiling brightly. "Hey, I'm gonna go introduce Amphy to Tiny and Shiny."

Ash's grip on her shoulder tightened just so at the mention of the pink Dragonair—Lance's Dragonair. He hadn't said anything about her deciding to keep Shiny, but he wasn't enthusiastic, either. They never spoke about Lance, not after she'd told him everything about her battle. At first, Lily had chalked up his strange silence to Charizard's death. She didn't blame him. It was Ivy that suggested otherwise.

"*Don't mention Lance or the Titan stuff around him too much,"* she'd said. *"There are some things you never understand about another person, and that can hurt some people more than others."*

Lily didn't really get it. She didn't understand what it must be like to be a Medium, to live with the knowledge that one day, Ash would be the last one standing of all the people and Pokémon he'd ever loved, alone in his existence after watching the ones he loved die before him. It didn't change how she felt about him. But Ivy had a way of looking at a person and picking out the darkest part of their heart. We are all as good and as bad as the darkest corner of our hearts, the loneliest secret that we carry until the end. It is the only thing we take with us, and the only thing we have left when everything else falls away.

Ash blinked and smiled at her, then pecked her on the cheek. "Sounds good. I'm gonna go shower. See you at dinner?"

Lily returned his smile and playfully batted the bill of his ratty, red cap. "You bet."

She watched him go. Surge had discreetly retired to the sitting room, presumably to pour himself a drink before Chuck could consume it all. The man was a tank, and no matter how much alcohol he consumed, he was hardly ever inebriated and remained in top physical health.

Bellators, Lily thought. *Now there's a medical miracle.*

"I'll be back down in just a minute," Lily said to Ethan. "We can talk business after dinner. I know Lt. Surge was eager to hear about what's happening with Marco's purge."

"No problem," Ethan said. "I've got Lyra's latest report from them right here." He patted the satchel strapped to his waist and thigh. "Short version? They're crushin' it."

"Then I guess we'll have a nice evening. I could use that."

Lily recalled Ampharos and headed back upstairs to the Saffron Solar, which she shared with Ash. The sounds of the shower in the connecting bathroom were muffled through the heavy, wooden doors, and she didn't announce her presence. Instead, she went back outside to the balcony, a little surprised to find both Dragonair still there. She thought for sure they would fly off and spend the night out.

They had been curled up on the carpet, perfectly at ease in the cool night air, but Shiny immediately spooked and slithered out of reach of Tiny when she heard Lily's approach.

"Hey, guys. Did I wake you up? Sorry about that."

She selected Ampharos's Pokéball, which was marked with a glow sticker that emanated a soft, yellow-green light in the starlight, and tossed it out. Ampharos appeared in the swirl of light, and the two Dragonair remained at a distance. Ampharos balanced on its long hind legs, the thick but blunt toenails on its feet digging into the rug Lily had laid out. Its fin-like front paws concealed small, nail-tipped fingers, almost like sleeves, that it could curl up to deliver powerful Thunderpunches in battle. The pearl on its tail, as big as a Pidgey egg, glowed softly and cast just the right amount of light on the balcony. The Dragonair's shadows projected on the stone railing like writhing serpents, coiled to strike at any moment.

"Amphy's gonna be joining us for a while. Amphy, this is Tiny," Lily pointed from Tiny to the pink Dragonair, "and that's Shiny."

Ampharos, a seasoned veteran of battles and long used to humans, hardly showed any signs of distress at its unfamiliar surroundings. Lily reached out a hand for it, and its striped ears perked up. She hesitated.

"You... You know what I am, right?"

Ampharos cocked its head and watched her with dark, depthless eyes, and as Lily stared back, she knew. She could see it. Millennia had diluted Ampharos's blood, just as they had diluted Lily's, but she could see it all the same. The Old Blood ran slowly in Ampharos's veins, quietly, never impatient and never restless, just there under the surface waiting to quicken. She could quicken it. All it would take was a simple word or two, the wave of a hand, something to jog its memory, let the magic do the rest. She'd gotten better at this since back then.

But she let her hand drop. "I don't wanna control you."

Ampharos yawned and let out a tired sigh, a bit like a sleepy canine. Lily could wait. She was patient, too. For now, Ampharos could adjust in its own time, on its own terms. She wouldn't force it. Never again.

She walked to the railing and leaned over the edge. The chill nipped her through her sweater, little thorns poking her through the woven threads, but she didn't mind the bite. Across the valley of Indigo Plateau, over the sea of lights in the village, lay the the mountains. The tallest of which was a dark behemoth that reached beyond the clouds and the stars and dared to oppose the moon in its ominous breadth. Mt. Silver, the heart of the badlands north of Indigo Plateau,

was the only thing separating human civilization from the untamed wilds where even a Dragon Master might not make it out alive.

Shiny slithered carefully around Lily's feet and let its winged head hover just next to Lily's, following her gaze out to darkness.

"What do you see out there?" she whispered.

They never did find a body. Washed away to the bottom of the sea, the Orange Navy commander said in the official statement. Not a trace of Lance left. Not even he could take on the might of the ocean and survive.

But they never did find a body.

Shiny lifted its head, wings alert like ears, and let out a mournful note that reverberated to the pit of Lily's heart. Beautiful, in the way heartbreak is beautiful so long as it isn't happening to you. Tiny added its own song to Shiny's, their cries tuning to each other for a beat here, then shifting the next.

Is there anyone out there?

The darkness rippled but never parted, swallowing even Ampharos's searchlights. Even if someone or something was out there, they would never find the beacon across this black ocean. They would never find her. But there was no one there. No one would have survived such a drowning, not even him. Especially not him. She'd watched, she'd seen him as he heard her call out to him, reach for him, offering just as he'd offered to her.

An ocean apart, vast and growing and black as the tidal abyss. There was no surviving that.

"*There's no surviving that,"* Ash had promised her, and they never spoke of it again.

The two Dragonair quieted down, their song dying on the cold night wind, washed away in the darkness. Only the night winds echoed them, as soft and chilly as a scorned lover's whispers.

"*You could stay with me."*

"Hey, is that you, Lily?" Ash called from inside the room. "D'you know where I left my towel? I'm totally freezing and I don't wanna drip water everywhere, you know?"

Lily jumped at the sound of Ash's voice and suddenly registered that she was shivering. It was freezing out here. She recalled all her Pokémon.

"I'm coming!" she called back. "Just a sec."

Lily hastily gathered up the blanket she'd brought out and wrapped it around her shoulders. The wind ruffled her ponytail, still short from when a mind-controlled Aerodactyl had almost Air Slashed her to pieces. She pulled open the door to the balcony against the winds.

"*You could stay...*"

She shivered, his voice in her ear as clear as the day he'd tempted her, and she slammed the doors closed behind her. The winds died down, locked out, and the darkness faded behind the thick curtains. Ash's towel was folded with the clean laundry she hadn't put away yet, and she tossed her blanket on a couch and retrieved the towel. She was alone and safe in the light.

"*Alone?*" Lance chuckled in her ear.

"Lily? Hey, is that my towel?" Ash poked his sopping head out around the door to the bathroom, letting out the steam trapped inside.

She swallowed and did her best to smile, and held out the towel with a shaking hand. "Yup, right here."

"*But* you're *here.*"

She dropped the towel, but Ash caught it. "Thanks! I'll be like two more minutes."

Ash closed the door, and Lily was alone again, her scarred hand trembling. Alone.

Save for him.

She could feel his fingers digging into the soft flesh of her cheeks, his bloody thumb running over her lip. Shaking, Lily rubbed her mouth with her sleeve furiously.

"Okay, ready to go down? I'm starving!" a clean and changed Ash said as he bounded out the bathroom door enthusiastically.

He grabbed Lily's hand and didn't wait for an answer.

"Yeah," Lily said.

She squeezed his hand, and their footsteps echoed in the stone stairwell behind them until they, too, faded, drowned in the darkness left behind, and Lily fought the temptation to look back.

This has been an incredible journey for me both writing this epic and hearing from and getting to know the reviewers that so graciously and thoughtfully shared their thoughts and emotions reading this with me. This is also technically the first multi-chapter fic I have ever finished, which I think means something really important. This story had to be told, and I am so happy I had the resolve to finish it. The reviewers are to thank in large part for keeping me going!

As you can probably guess due to Rosa's and now Iris's small roles in this story, an official sequel to this fic will transport us all to Unova for some new and very different adventures and challenges. Ash will be back for it, as well. I hope you will all check out that fic, entitled **Clash of Crowns,** *if you enjoyed this fic and my writing style in general. Another short sequel, entitled* **Elephant Graveyard,** *will directly pick up where this left off and follow some post-fic adventures about Lily, Ash, and others and resolve Mewtwo's story with some fun (or perhaps nail-biting) twists on the way. I also have a few other Pokémon fics in the wings, all set in the same realistic Pokémon/Tamers AU developed here but that stand alone plot-wise, so this is not my last foray into the fandom by any means.*

Thanks again for reading, everyone! It's been real.